

PLANET STORIES



STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER
WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE
OF FUTURE CENTURIES

SPRING, 1944

20c

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BRACKETT
•
ROBERT
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WANDERERS OF THE WOLF-MOON

AN AMAZING NOVEL OF THE SARGASSO SPACEWAYS

By NELSON S. BOND

PLANET STORIES



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PLANET STORIES' OFF-TRAIL NOVEL

THE JEWEL OF BAS Leigh Brackett 3

An eerie tale of a boy-God sleeping through eternity on a world he had created with his Stone of Destiny; of the Androids he had created and their diabolic plan for destroying that world—and of two mortals trying vainly to battle for a doomed planet and to stop the immortals' plans.

A THRILLING NOVEL OF AN ALIEN WORLD

WANDERERS OF THE WOLF-MOON Nelson S. Bond 72

Marooned on Titan, their ship wrecked, the radio smashed, the members of the pleasure cruise had to exist on a hostile world. And the man who assumed command was Gregory Malcolm, the bespectacled secretary—whose only adventures had come through the vicarious thrills found in the printed pages of a book.

FIVE POWERFUL PLANET SHORT STORIES

THE AVENGER Stuart Fleming 31

Karson was fighting fire with fire—paving the way for a holocaust.

THE MONSTER MAKER Ray Bradbury 39

A camera is one devil of a poor weapon with which to capture a pirate's fortress.

SABOTEUR OF SPACE Robert Abernathy 48

A coward and a murderous martyr had one purpose—"Murder Dying Earth."

QUEST'S END Basil Wells 65

Thig's work was not yet finished—he must face his vicious master race again.

AND THE GODS LAUGHED Fredric Brown 105

The space lie was so good it might have been true. — *Might have been?*

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

THE RINGER FAMILY Guy Gifford 64

P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH 113

Meet Chad Oliver, a fan who knows his ins and outs of the Vizigraph.

THE VIZIGRAPH 114

The interplanetary melting pot of grieves and gripes, pleas and commands—where the cash customer earns his money's worth.

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Planet Stories' Off-Trail Tale

THE JEWEL OF BAS

There was a boy-God, sleeping through eternity. And there were his "Stone of Life" and the androids he had created of matter and energy. And there was a world that was to die from the machinations of the androids' diabolic minds. There were Mouse and Ciaran to stem the death-flood—two mortals fighting the immortals' plans for conquest.



**A WEIRD NOVEL OF FASCINATING
POWER**

by

LEIGH BRACKETT



THE JEWEL OF BAS

By LEIGH BRACKETT

MOUSE stirred the stew in the small iron pot. There wasn't much of it. She sniffed and said: "I could have stolen a bigger joint. I'm hungry before the next town." Ciaran grunted lazily. "You'll curl in Mouse's eyes.

"I suppose it's all right with you if we run out of food," she said sullenly.

Ciaran leaned back comfortably against a moss-grown boulder and watched her with lazy grey eyes. He liked watching Mouse. She was a head shorter than he, which made her very short indeed, and as



Illustration by Ingels

thin as a young girl. Her hair was black and wild, as though only wind ever combed it. Her eyes were black, too, and very bright. There was a small red thief's brand between them. She wore a ragged crimson tunic, and her bare arms and legs were as brown as his own.

Ciaran grinned. His lip was scarred, and there was a tooth missing behind it. He said, "It's just as well. I don't want you getting fat and lazy."

Mouse, who was sensitive about her thinness, said something pungent and threw the wooden plate at him. Ciaran drew his shaggy head aside enough to let it by and then relaxed, stroking the harp on his bare brown knees. It began to purr softly.

Ciaran felt good. The heat of the sun-balls that floated always, lazy in a reddish sky, made him pleasantly sleepy. And after the clamor and crush of the market squares in the border towns, the huge high silence of the place was wonderful.

He and Mouse were camped on a tongue of land that licked out from the Phrygian hills down into the coastal plains of Atlantea. A short cut, but only gypsies like themselves ever took it. To Ciaran's left, far below, the sea spread sullen and burning, cloaked in a reddish fog.

To his right, also far below, were the Forbidden Plains. Flat, desolate, and barren, reaching away and away to the up-curving rim of the world, where Ciaran's sharp eyes could just make out a glint of gold; a mammoth peak reaching for the sky.

Mouse said suddenly, "Is that it, Kiri? Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life,"

Ciaran struck a shivering chord from the harp. "That's it."

"Let's eat," said Mouse.

"Scared?"

"Maybe you want me to go back! Maybe you think a branded thief isn't good enough for you! Well I can't help where I was born or what my parents were—and you'd have a brand on your ugly face too, if you hadn't just been lucky!"

She threw the ladle.

This time her aim was better and Ciaran didn't duck quite in time. It clipped his ear. He sprang up, looking murderous, and started to heave it back at her. And then, suddenly, Mouse was crying, stamp-

ing up and down and blinking tears out of her eyes.

"All right, I'm scared! I've never been out of a city before, and besides . . ." She looked out over the silent plain, to the distant glint of Ben Beatha. "Besides," she whispered, "I keep thinking of the stories they used to tell—about Bas the Immortal, and his androids, and the grey beasts that served them. And about the Stone of Destiny."

C IARAN made a contemptuous mouth. "Legends. Old wive's tales. Songs to give babies a pleasant shiver." A small glint of avarice came into his grey eyes. "But the Stone of Destiny—it's a nice story, that one. A jewel of such power that owning it gives a man rule over the whole world . . ."

He squinted out across the barren plain. "Some day," he said softly, "maybe I'll see if that one's true."

"Oh, Kiri." Mouse came and caught his wrists in her small strong hands. "You wouldn't. It's forbidden—and no one that's gone into the Forbidden Plains has ever come back."

"There's always a first time." He grinned. "But I'm not going now, Mousie. I'm too hungry."

She picked up the plate silently and ladled stew into it and set it down. Ciaran laid his harp down and stretched—a tough, wiry little man with legs slightly bandy and a good-natured hard face. He wore a yellow tunic even more ragged than Mouse's.

They sat down. Ciaran ate noisily with his fingers. Mouse fished out a hunk of meat and nibbled it moodily. A breeze came up, pushing the sun-balls around a little and bringing tatters of red fog in off the sea. After a while Mouse said:

"Did you hear any of the talk in the market squares, Kiri?"

He shrugged. "They gabble. I don't waste my time with it."

"All along the border countries they were saying the same thing. People who live or work along the edge of the Forbidden Plains have disappeared. Whole towns of them, sometimes."

"One man falls into a beast-pit," said Ciaran impatiently, "and in two weeks

of gossip the whole country has vanished. Forget it."

"But it's happened before, Kiri. A long time ago . . ."

"A long time ago some wild tribe living on the Plains came in and got tough, and that's that!" Ciaran wiped his hands on the grass and said angrily, "If you're going to nag all the time about being scared . . ."

He caught the plate out of her hands just in time. She was breathing hard, glaring at him. She looked like her name, and cute as hell. Ciaran laughed.

"Come here, you."

She came, sulkily. He pulled her down beside him and kissed her and took the harp on his knees. Mouse put her head on his shoulder. Ciaran was suddenly very happy.

HE BEGAN to draw music out of the harp. There was a lot of distance around him, and he tried to fill it up with music, a fine free spate of it out of the thrumming strings. Then he sang. He had a beautiful voice, clear and true as a new blade, but soft. It was a simple tune, about two people in love. Ciaran liked it.

After a while Mouse reached up and drew his head around, stroking the scar on his lip so he had to stop singing. She wasn't glaring any longer. Ciaran bent his head.

His eyes were closed. But he felt her body stiffen against him, and her lips broke away from his with a little gasping cry.

"Kiri—Kiri, look!"

He jerked his head back, angry and startled. Then the anger faded.

There was a different quality to the light. The warm, friendly, reddish sunlight that never dimmed or faded.

There was a shadow spreading out in the sky over Ben Beatha. It grew and widened, and the sunballs went out, one by one, and darkness came toward them over the Forbidden Plains.

They crouched, clinging together, not speaking, not breathing. An uneasy breeze sighed over them, moving out. Then, after a long time, the sunballs sparked and burned again, and the shadow was gone.

Ciaran dragged down an unsteady breath. He was sweating, but where

his hands and Mouse's touched, locked together, they were cold as death.

"What was it, Kiri?"

"I don't know." He got up, slinging the harp across his back without thinking about it. He felt naked suddenly, up there on the high ridge. Stripped and unsafe. He pulled Mouse to her feet. Neither of them spoke again. Their eyes had a queer stunned look.

This time it was Ciaran that stopped, with the stewpot in his hands, looking at something behind Mouse. He dropped it and jumped in front of her, pulling the wicked knife he carried from his girdle. The last thing he heard was her wild scream.

But he had time enough to see. To see the creatures climbing up over the crest of the ridge beside them, fast and silent and grinning, to ring them in with wands tipped at the point with opals like tiny sunballs.

They were no taller than Mouse, but thick and muscular, built like men. Grey animal fur grew on them like the body-hair of a hairy man, lengthening into a coarse mane over the skull. Where the skin showed it was grey and wrinkled and tough.

Their faces were flat, with black animal nose-buttons. They had sharp teeth, grey with a bright, healthy greyness. Their eyes were blood-pink, without whites or visible pupils.

The eyes were the worst.

Ciaran yelled and slashed out with his knife. One of the grey brutes danced in on lithe, quick feet and touched him on the neck with its jeweled wand.

Fire exploded in Ciaran's head, and then there was darkness, pierced by Mouse's scream. As he slid down into it he thought:

"They're Kalds. The beasts of legend that served Bas the Immortal and his androids. Kalds, that guarded the Forbidden Plains from man!"

Ciaran came to, on his feet and walking. From the way he felt he'd been walking a long time, but his memory was vague and confused. He had been relieved of his knife, but his harp was still with him.

Mouse walked beside him. Her black hair hung over her face and her eyes

looked out from behind it, sullen and defiant.

The grey beasts walked in a rough circle around them, holding their wands ready. From the way they grinned, Ciaran had an idea they hoped they'd have an excuse for using them.

With a definitely uneasy shock, Ciaran realized that they were far out in the barren waste of the Forbidden Plains.

He got a little closer to Mouse. "Hello."

She looked at him. "You and your short cuts! So all that talk in the border towns was just gabble, huh?"

"So it's my fault! If that isn't just like a woman. . . ." Ciaran made an impatient gesture. "All right, all right! That doesn't matter now. What does matter is where are we going and why?"

"How should I— Wait a minute. We're stopping."

The Kalds warned them with their wands to stand. One of the grey brutes seemed to be listening to something that Ciaran couldn't hear. Presently it gestured and the party started off again in a slightly different direction.

After a minute or two a gully appeared out of nowhere at their feet. From up on the ridge the Forbidden Plains had looked perfectly flat, but the gully was fairly wide and cut in clean like a sword gash, hidden by a slight roll of the land. They scrambled down the steep bank and went along the bottom.

Again with an uneasy qualm, Ciaran realized they were headed in the general direction of Ben Beatha.

The old legends had been gradually lost in the stream of time, except to people who cared for such things, or made a living from singing about them, like Ciaran. But in spite of that Ben Beatha was tabu.

The chief reason was physical. The Plains, still called Forbidden, ringed the mountain like a protective wall, and it was an indisputable fact whether you liked it or not that people who went out onto them didn't come back. Hunger, thirst, wild beasts, or devils—they didn't come back. That discouraged a lot of traveling.

Besides, the only reason for attempting to reach Ben Beatha was the legend of the Stone of Destiny, and people had long ago lost faith in that. Nobody had

seen it. Nobody had seen Bas the Immortal who was its god and guardian, nor the androids that were his servants, nor the Kalds that were slaves to both of them.

Long, long ago people were supposed to have seen them. In the beginning, according to the legends, Bas the Immortal had lived in a distant place—a green world where there was only one huge sun-ball that rose and set regularly, where the sky was sometimes blue and sometimes black and silver, and where the horizon curved down. The manifest idiocy of all that still tickled people so they liked to hear songs about it.

Somewhere on that green world, somehow, Bas had acquired the flaming stone that gave him the power of life and death and destiny. There were a lot of conflicting and confused stories about trouble between Bas and the inhabitants of the funny world with the sky that changed like a woman's fancy. Eventually he was supposed to have gathered up a lot of these inhabitants through the power of the stone and transported them somehow across a great distance to the world where they now lived.

CIARAN had found that children loved these yarns—particularly. Their imaginations were still elastic enough not to see the ridiculous side. He always gave the Distance Cycle a lot of schmalztz.

So after Bas the Immortal and his Stone of Destiny had got all these people settled in a new world, Bas created his androids, Khafre and Steud, and brought the Kalds from somewhere out in that vague Distance; another world, perhaps. And there were wars and revolts and raiding parties, and bitter struggles between Bas and the androids and the humans for power, with Bas always winning because of the Stone. There was a bottomless well of material there for ballads. Ciaran used it frequently.

But the one legend that had always maintained its original shape under the battering or generations was the one about Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life, being the dwelling place of Bas the Immortal and his androids and the Kalds. And somewhere under Ben Beatha was the Stone, whose possession could give a man life

eternal and the powers of whatever god you chose to believe in.

Ciaran had toyed with that one in spite of his skepticism. Now it looked as though he was going to see for himself.

He looked at the Kalds, the creatures who didn't exist, and found his skepticism shaken. Shaken so hard he felt sick with it, like a man waking up to find a nightmare beside him in the flesh, booting his guts in.

If the Kalds were real, the androids were real. From the androids you went to Bas, and from Bas to the Stone of Destiny.

Ciaran began to sweat with sheer excitement.

Mouse jerked her head up suddenly. "Kiri—listen!"

From somewhere up ahead and to the right there began to come a rhythmic, swinging clank of metal. Underneath it Ciaran made out the shuffle of bare or sandalled feet.

The Kalds urged them on faster with the jewel-tipped wands. The hot opalescence of the tips struck Ciaran all at once. A jewel-fire that could shock a man to unconsciousness like the blow of a fist, just by touching.

The power of the Stone, perhaps. The Stone of Destiny, sleeping under Ben Beatha.

The shuffle and clank got louder. Quite suddenly they came to a place where the gully met another one almost at right angles, and stopped. The ears of the Kalds twitched nervously.

Mouse shrank in closer against Ciaran. She was looking off down the new cut. Ciaran looked, too.

There were Kalds coming toward them. About forty of them, with wands. Walking between their watchful lines were some ninety or a hundred humans, men and women, shackled together by chains run through loops in iron collars. They were so close together they had to lock-step, and any attempt at attacking their guards would have meant the whole column falling flat.

Mouse said, with vicious clarity, "One man falls into a beast pit, and in three weeks of gossip a whole town is gone. Hah!"

Ciaran's scarred mouth got ugly. "Keep going, Mousie. Just keep it up." He

scowled at the slave gang and added, "But what the hell is it all about? What do they want us for?"

"You'll find out," said Mouse. "You and your short cuts."

Ciaran raised his hand. Mouse ducked and started to swing on him. A couple of Kalds moved in and touched them apart, very delicately, with the wands. They didn't want knockouts this time. Just local numbness.

Ciaran was feeling murderous enough to start something anyway, but a second flick of the wand on the back of his neck took the starch out of him. By that time the slave party had come up and stopped.

Ciaran stumbled over into line and let the Kalds lock the collar around his neck. The man in front of him was huge, with a mane of red hair and cords of muscle on his back the size of Ciaran's arm. He hadn't a stitch on but a leather G-string. His freckled, red-haired skin was slippery with sweat. Ciaran, pressed up against him, shut his mouth tight and began to breathe very hard with his face turned as far away as he could get it.

They shackled Mouse right in back of him. She put her arms around his waist, tighter than she really had to. Ciaran squeezed her hands.

II

THE KALDS started the line moving again, using the wands like ox-goads. They shuffled off down the gully, going deeper and deeper into the Forbidden Plains.

Very softly, so that nobody but Ciaran could hear her, Mouse whispered, "These locks are nothing. I can pick them any time."

Ciaran squeezed her hand again. It occurred to him that Mouse was a handy girl to have around.

After a while she said, "Kiri—that shadow. We did see it?"

"We did." He shivered in spite of himself.

"What was it?"

"How should I know? And you better save your breath. Looks like a long walk ahead of us."

It was. They threaded their way through a growing maze of cracks in the

plain, cracks that got deeper and deeper, so you had to look straight up to see the red sky and the little floating suns. Ciaran found himself watching furtively to make sure they were still shining. He wished Mousie hadn't reminded him of the shadow. He'd never been closer to cold, clawing panic than in those moments on the ridge.

The rest of the slave gang had obviously come a long way already. They were tired. But the Kalds goaded them on, and it wasn't until about a third of the line was being held up bodily by those in front or behind that a halt was called.

They came to a fairly-wide place where three of the gullies came together. The Kalds formed the line into a circle, squeezed in on itself so they were practically sitting in each other's laps, and then stood by watchfully, lolling pink tongues over their bright grey teeth and letting the wands flash in the dimmed light.

Ciaran let his head and shoulders roll over onto Mousie. For some time he had felt her hands working around her own collar, covered by her hair and the harp slung across his back. She wore a rather remarkable metal pin that had other functions than holding her tunic on, and she knew how to use it.

Her collar was still in place, but he knew she could slide out of it now any time she wanted. She bent forward over him as though she was exhausted. Her black hair fell over his face and neck. Under it her small quick hands got busy.

The lock snapped quietly, and the huge red-haired man collapsed slowly on top of Ciaran. His voice whispered, but there was nothing weak about it.

He said, "Now me."

Ciaran squirmed and cursed. The vast weight crushed him to silence.

"I'm a hunter. I can hear a rabbit breathing in its warren. I heard the woman speak. Free me or I'll make trouble."

Ciaran sighed resignedly, and Mouse went to work.

CIARAN looked around the circle of exhausted humans. Charcoal burners, trappers, hoop-shavers—the lean, tough, hard-bitten riff-raff of the border wilderness. Even the women were tough. Ciaran began to get ideas.

There was a man crushed up against them on the other side—the man who had hitherto been at the head of the column. He was tall and stringy like a hungry cat, and just as mean looking, hunched over his knees with his face buried in his forearms and a shag of iron-grey hair falling over his shoulders.

Ciaran nudged him. "You—don't make any sign. Game to take a chance?"

The shaggy head turned slightly, just enough to unveil an eye. Ciaran wished suddenly he'd kept his mouth shut. The eye was pale, almost white, with a queer unhuman look as though it saw only gods or devils, and nothing in between.

Ciaran had met hermits before in his wanderings. He knew the signs. Normally he rather liked hermits, but this one gave him unpleasant qualms in the stomach.

The man dragged a rusty voice up from somewhere. "We are enslaved by devils. Only the pure can overcome devils. Are you pure?"

Ciaran managed not to choke. "As a bird in its nest," he said. "A newly-fledged bird. In fact, a bird still in the shell."

The cold, pale eye looked at him without blinking.

Ciaran resisted an impulse to punch it and said, "We have a means of freeing ourselves. If enough could be freed, when the time came we might rush the Kalds."

"Only the pure can prevail against devils."

Ciaran gave him a smile of beatific innocence. The scar and the missing tooth rather spoiled the effect, but his eyes made up for it in bland sweetness.

"You shall lead us, Father," he cooed. "With such purity as yours, we can't fail."

The hermit thought about that for a moment and then said, "I will pass the word. Give me the feke."

Ciaran's jaw dropped. His eyes got glassy.

"The feke," said the hermit patiently. "The jiggler."

Ciaran closed his eyes. "Mouse," he said weakly, "give the gentleman the pick-lock."

Mouse slid it to him, a distance of about two inches. The red-haired giant took some of his weight off Ciaran. Mouse was looking slightly dazed herself.

"Hadn't I better do it for you?" she asked, rather pompously.

The hermit gave her a cold glance. He bent his head and brought his hands up between his knees. His collar mate on the other side never noticed a thing, and the hermit beat Mouse's time by a good third.

Ciaran laughed. He lay in Mouse's lap and had mild hysterics. Mouse cuffed him furiously across the back of his neck, and even that didn't stop him.

He pulled himself up, looked through streaming eyes at Mouse's murderous small face, and bit his knuckles to keep from screaming.

The hermit was already quietly at work on the man next him.

Ciaran unslung his harp. The grey Kalds hadn't noticed anything yet. Both Mouse and the hermit were very smooth workers. Ciaran plucked out a few sonorous minor chords, and the Kalds flicked their blood-pink eyes at him, but didn't seem to think the harp called for any action.

Ciaran relaxed and played louder.

Under cover of the music he explained his plan to the big red hunter, who nodded and began whispering to his other collar-mate. Ciaran began to sing.

He gave them a lament, one of the wild dark things the Cimmerians sing at the bier of a chief and very appropriate to the occasion. The Kalds lounged, enjoying the rest. They weren't watching for it, so they didn't see, as Ciaran did, the breathing of the word of hope around the circle.

CIVILIZED people would have given the show away. But these were bordermen, as wary and self-contained as animals. It was only in their eyes that you could see anything. They got busy, under cover of their huddled bodies and long-haired, bowed-over heads, with every buckle and pin they could muster.

Mouse and the hermit passed instructions along the line, and since they were people who were used to using their hands with skill, it seemed as though a fair number of locks might get picked. The collars were left carefully in place.

Ciaran finished his lament and was half way through another when the Kalds decided it was time to go.

They moved in to goad the line back into

position. Ciaran's harp crashed out suddenly in angry challenge, and the close-packed circle split into a furious confusion.

Ciaran slung his harp over his shoulder and sprang up, shaking off the collar. All around him was the clash of chain metal on rock, the scuffle of feet, the yells and heavy breathing of angry men. The Kalds came leaping in, their wands flashing. Somebody screamed. Ciaran got a fistful of Mouse's tunic in his left hand and started to butt through the mêlée. He had lost track of the hermit and the hunter.

Then, quite suddenly, it was dark.

Silence closed down on the gully. A black, frozen silence, with not even a sound of breathing in it. Ciaran stood still, looking up at the dark sky. He didn't even tremble. He was beyond that.

Black darkness, in a land of eternal light.

Somewhere then, a woman screamed with a terrible mad strength, and hell broke loose.

Ciaran ran. He didn't think about where he was going, only that he had to get away. He was still gripping Mouse. Bodies thrashed and blundered and shrieked in the darkness. Twice he and Mouse were knocked kicking. It didn't stop them.

They broke through finally into a clear space. There began to be light again, pale and feeble at first but flickering back toward normal. They were in a broad gully kicked smooth on the bottom by the passing of many feet. They ran down it.

After a while Mouse fell and Ciaran dropped beside her. He lay there, fighting for breath, twitching and jerking like an animal with sheer panic. He was crying a little because it was light again.

Mouse clung to him, pressing tight as though she wanted to merge her body with his and hide it. She had begun to shake.

"Kiri," she whispered, over and over again. "Kiri, what was it?"

Ciaran held her head against his shoulder and stroked it. "I don't know, honey. But it's all right now. It's gone."

Gone. But it could come back. It had once. Maybe next time it would stay.

Darkness, and the sudden cold.

The legends began crawling through Ciaran's mind. If Bas the Immortal was true, and the Stone of Destiny was true,

and the Stone gave Bas power over the life and death of a world . . . then . . . ?

Maybe Bas was getting tired of the world and wanted to throw it away.

The rational stubbornness in man that says a thing is not because it's never been before helped Ciaran steady down. But he couldn't kid himself that there hadn't been darkness where no darkness had even been dreamed of before.

He shook his head and started to pull Mouse to her feet, and then his quick ears caught the sound of someone coming toward them, running. Several someones.

There was no place to hide. Ciaran got Mouse behind him and waited, half crouching.

It was the hunter, with the hermit loping like a stringy cat at his heels and a third man behind them both. They all looked a little crazy, and they didn't seem to be going to stop.

Ciaran said, "Hey!"

THEY slowed down looking at him with queer, blank eyes. Ciaran blew up, because he had to relax somehow.

"It's all over now. What are you scared of? It's gone." He cursed them, with more feeling than fairness. "What about the Kalds? What happened back there?"

The hunter wiped a huge hand across his red-bearded face. "Everybody went crazy," he said thickly. "Some got killed or hurt. Some got away, like us. The rest were caught again." He jerked his head back. "They're coming this way. They're hunting us. They hunt by scent, the grey beasts do."

"Then we've got to get going." Ciaran turned around. "Mouse. You, Mousie! Snap out of it, honey. It's all right now."

She shivered and choked over her breath, and the hermit fixed them both with pale, mad eyes.

"It was a warning," he said. "A portent of judgment, when only the pure shall be saved." He pointed a bony finger at Ciaran. "I told you that evil could not prevail against devils!"

That got through to Mouse. Sense came back into her black eyes. She took a step toward the hermit and let go.

"Don't you call him evil—or me either! We've never hurt anybody yet, beyond

lifting a little food or a trinket. And besides, who the hell are you to talk! Anybody as handy with a picklock as you are has had plenty of practice. . . ."

Mouse paused for breath, and Ciaran got a look at the hermit's face. His stomach quivered. He tried to shut Mouse up, but she was feeling better and beginning to enjoy herself. She plunged into a detailed analysis of the hermit's physique and heredity. She had a vivid and inventive mind.

Ciaran finally got his hand over her mouth, taking care not to get bitten. "Nice going," he said, "but we've got to get out of here. You can finish later."

She started to heel his shins, and then quite suddenly she stopped and stiffened up under his hands. She was looking at the hermit. Ciaran looked, too. His insides knotted, froze, and began to do tricks.

The hermit said quietly, "You are finished now." His pale eyes held them, and there was nothing human about his gaze, or the cold calm of his voice.

"You are evil. You are thieves—and I know, for I was a thief myself. You have the filth of the world on you, and no wish to clean it off."

He moved toward them. It was hardly a step, hardly more than an inclination of the body, but Ciaran gave back before it.

"I killed a man. I took a life in sin and anger, and now I have made my peace. You have not. You will not. And if need comes, I can kill again—without remorse."

He could, too. There was nothing ludicrous about him now. He was stating simple fact, and the dignity of him was awesome. Ciaran scowled down at the dust.

"Hell," he said, "we're sorry, Father. Mouse has a quick tongue, and we've both had a bad scare. She didn't mean it. We respect any man's conscience."

There was a cold, hard silence, and then the third man cried out with a sort of subdued fury:

"Let's go! Do you want to get caught again?"

He was a gnarled, knotty, powerful little man, beginning to grizzle but not to slow down. He wore a kilt of skins. His

hide was dark and tough as leather, his hazel eyes set in nests of wrinkles.

The hunter, who had been hearing nothing but noises going back and forth over his head, turned and led off down the gully. The others followed, still not speaking.

Ciaran was thinking, He's crazy. He's clear off his head—and of all the things we didn't need, a crazy hermit heads the list!

There was a cold spot between his shoulders that wouldn't go away even when he started sweating with exertion.

THE GULLY was evidently a main trail to Somewhere. There were many signs of recent passage by a lot of people, including an occasional body kicked off to the side and left to dry.

The little knotty man, who was a trapper named Ram, examined the bodies with a terrible stony look in his eyes.

"My wife and my first son," he said briefly. "The grey beasts took them while I was gone."

He turned grimly away.

Ciaran was glad when the bodies proved to be the wrong ones.

Ram and the big red hunter took turns scaling the cleft walls for a look. Mouse said something about taking to the face of the Plain where they wouldn't be hemmed in. They looked at her grimly.

"The grey beasts are up there," they said. "Flanking us. If we go up, they'll only take us and chain us again."

Ciaran's heart took a big, staggering jump. "In other words, they're herding us. We're going the way they want us to, so they don't bother to round us up."

The hunter nodded professionally. "Is a good plan."

"Oh, fine!" snarled Ciaran. "What I want to know is, is there any way out?"

The hunter shrugged.

"I'm going on anyway," said Ram. "My wife and son. . . ."

Ciaran thought about the Stone of Destiny, and was rather glad there was no decision to make.

They went on, at an easy jog trot. By bits and pieces Ciaran built up the picture—raiding gangs of Kalds coming quietly onto isolated border villages, combing the brush and the forest for stragglers. Where they took the humans, or why, nobody could guess.

froze to a dead stop. The others crouched behind him, instinctively holding their breath.

The hunter whispered, "People. Many of them." His flat palm made an emphatic move for quiet.

Small cold prickles flared across Ciaran's skin. He found Mouse's hand in his and squeezed it. Suddenly, with no more voice than the sigh of a breeze through bracken, the hermit laughed.

"Judgment," he whispered. "Great things moving." His pale eyes were fey. "Doom and destruction, a shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying."

He looked at them one by one, and threw his head back, laughing without sound, the stringy cords working in his throat.

"And of all of you, I *alone* have no fear!"

They went on, slowly, moving without sound in small shapeless puddles of shadow thrown by the floating sunballs. Ciaran found himself almost in the lead, beside the hunter.

They edged around a jog in the cleft wall. About ten feet ahead of them the cleft floor plunged underground, through a low opening shored with heavy timbers.

There were two Kalds lounging in front of it, watching their wands flash in the light.

The five humans stopped. The Kalds came toward them, almost lazily, running rough grey tongues over their shiny teeth. Their blood-pink eyes were bright with pleasure.

Ciaran groaned. "This is it. Shall we be brave, or just smart?"

The hunter cocked his huge fists. And then Ram let go a queer animal moan. He shoved past Ciaran and went to his knees beside something Ciaran hadn't noticed before.

A woman lay awkwardly against the base of the cliff. She was brown and stringy and not very young, with a plain, good face. A squat, thick-shouldered boy sprawled almost on top of her. There was a livid burn on the back of his neck. They were both dead.

Ciaran thought probably the woman had dropped from exhaustion, and the kid had died fighting to save her. He felt sick.

Ram put a hand on each of their faces.

His own was stony and quite blank. After the first cry he didn't make a sound.

He got up and went for the Kald nearest to him.

III

HE DID IT like an animal, quick and without thinking. The Kald was quick, too. It jabbed the wand at Ram, but the little brown man was coming so fast that it didn't stop him. He must have died in mid-leap, but his body knocked the Kald over and bore him down.

Ciaran followed him in a swift cat leap.

He heard the hunter grunting and snarling somewhere behind him, and the thudding of bare feet being very busy. He lost sight of the other Kald. He lost sight of everything but a muscular grey arm that was trying to pull a jewel-tipped wand from under Ram's corpse. There was a terrible stink of burned flesh.

Ciaran grabbed the grey wrist. He didn't bother with it, or the arm. He slid his grip up to the fingers, got his other hand beside it, and started wrenching.

Bone cracked and split. Ciaran worked desperately, from the thumb and the little finger. Flesh tore. Splinters of grey bone came through. Ciaran's hands slipped in the blood. The grey beast opened its mouth, but no sound came. Ciaran decided then the things were dumb. It was human enough to sweat.

Ciaran grabbed the wand.

A grey paw, the other one, came clawing for his throat around the bulk of Ram's shoulders. He flicked it with the wand. It went away, and Ciaran speared the jewel tip down hard against the Kald's throat.

After a while Mouse's voice came to him from somewhere. "It's done, Kiri. No use overcooking it."

It smelled done, all right. Ciaran got up. He looked at the wand in his hand, holding it away off. He whistled.

Mouse said, "Stop admiring yourself and get going. The hunter says he can hear chains."

Ciaran looked around. The other Kald lay on the ground. Its neck seemed to be broken. The body of the squat, dark boy lay on top of it. The hunter said:

"He didn't feel the wand. I think he'd

be glad to be a club for killing one of them, if he knew it."

Ciaran said, "Yeah." He looked at Mouse. She seemed perfectly healthy. "Aren't women supposed to faint at things like this?"

She snorted. "I was born in the Thieves' Quarter. We used to roll skulls instead of pennies. They weren't so scarce."

"I think," said Ciaran, "the next time I get married I'll ask more questions. Let's go."

They went down the ramp leading under the Forbidden Plains. The hunter led, like a wary beast. Ciaran brought up the rear. They both carried the stolen wands.

The hermit hadn't spoken a word, or moved a hand to help.

It was fairly dark there underground, but not cold. In fact, it was hotter than outside, and got worse as they went down. Ciaran could hear a sound like a hundred armorers beating on shields. Only louder. There was a feeling of a lot of people moving around but not talking much, and an occasional crash or metallic screaming that Ciaran didn't have any explanation for. He found himself not liking it.

They went a fairish way on an easy down-slope, and then the light got brighter. The hunter whispered, "Careful!" and slowed down. They drifted like four ghosts through an archway into a glow of clear bluish light.

THEY stood on a narrow ledge. Just here it was hand-smoothed, but on both sides it ran in nature-eroded roughness into a jumble of stalactites and wind-galleries. Above the ledge, in near darkness, was the high roof arch, and straight ahead, there was just space. Eventually, a long way off, Ciaran made out a wall of rock.

Below there was a pit. It was roughly barrel-shaped. It was deep. It was so deep that Ciaran had to crane over the edge to see bottom. Brilliant blue-white flares made it brighter than daylight about two-thirds of the way up the barrel.

There were human beings laboring in the glare. They were tiny things no bigger than ants from this height. They wore no chains, and Ciaran couldn't see any guards. But after the first look he quit worrying about any of that. The Thing

growing up in the pit took all his attention.

It was built of metal. It rose and spread in intricate swooping curves of shining whiteness, filling the whole lower part of the cavern. Ciaran stared at it with a curious numb feeling of awe.

The thing wasn't finished. He had not the faintest idea what it was for. But he was suddenly terrified of it.

It was more than just the sheer crushing size of it, or the unfamiliar metallic construction that was like nothing he had seen or even dreamed of before. It was the thing itself.

It was Power. It was Strength. It was a Titan growing there in the belly of the world, getting ready to reach out and grip it and play with it, like Mouse gambling with an empty skull.

He knew, looking at it, that no human brain in his own scale and time of existence had conceived that shining monster, nor shaped of itself one smallest part of it.

The red hunter said simply, "I'm scared. And this smells like a trap."

Ciaran swallowed something that might have been his heart. "We're in it, pal, like it or don't. And we'd better get out of sight before that chain-gang runs into us."

Off to the side, along the rough part of the ledge where there were shadows and holes and pillars of rock, seemed the best bet. There was a way down to the cavern floor—a dizzy zig-zag of ledges, ladders, and steps. But once on it you were stuck, and no cover.

They edged off, going as fast as they dared. Mouse was breathing rather heavily and her face was white enough to make the brand show like a blood-drop between her brows.

The hermit seemed to be moving in a private world of his own. The sight of the shining giant had brought a queer blaze to his eyes, something Ciaran couldn't read and didn't like. Otherwise, he might as well have been dead. He hadn't spoken since he cursed them, back in the gully.

They crouched down out of sight among a forest of stalactites. Ciaran watched the ledge. He whispered, "They hunt by scent?"

The hunter nodded. "I think the other humans will cover us. Too many scents

in this place. But how did they have those two waiting for us at the cave mouth?"

Ciaran shrugged. "Telepathy. Thought transference. Lots of the backwater people have it. Why not the Kalds?"

"You don't," said the hunter, "think of them as having human minds."

"Don't kid yourself. They think, all right. They're not human, but they're not true animals either."

"Did they think *that*?" The hunter pointed at the pit.

"No," said Ciaran slowly. "They didn't."

"Then who—" He broke off. "Quiet! Here they come."

Ciaran held his breath, peering one-eyed around a stalactite. The slave-gang, with the grey guards, began to file out of the tunnel and down the steep descent to the bottom. There was no trouble. There was no trouble left in any of those people. There were several empty collars. There were also fewer Kalds. Some had stayed outside to track down the four murderous fugitives, which meant no escape at that end.

Ciaran got an idea. When the last of the line and the guards were safely over the edge he whispered, "Come on. We'll go down right on their tails."

Mouse gave him a startled look. He said impatiently, "They won't be looking back and up—I hope. And there won't be anybody else coming up while they're going down. You've got a better idea about getting down off this bloody perch, spill it!"

She didn't have, and the hunter nodded. "Is good. Let's go."

THEY WENT, like the very devil. Since all were professionals in their own line they didn't make any more fuss than so many leaves falling. The hermit followed silently. His pale eyes went to the shining monster in the pit at every opportunity.

He was fermenting some idea in his shaggy head. Ciaran had a hunch the safest thing would be to quietly trip him off into space. He resisted it, simply because knifing a man in a brawl was one thing and murdering an unsuspecting elderly man in cold blood was another.

Later, he swore a solemn oath to drop humanitarianism, but hard.

Nobody saw them. The Kalds and the people below were all too busy not breaking their necks to have eyes for anything else. Nobody came down behind them—a risk they had had to run. They were careful to keep a whole section of the descent between them and the slave gang.

It was a hell of a long way down. The metal monster grew and grew and slid up beside them, and then above them, towering against the vault. It was beautiful. Ciaran loved its beauty even while he hated and feared its strength.

Then he realized there were people working on it, clinging like flies to its white beams and arches. Some worked with wands not very different from the one he carried, fusing metal joints in a sparkle of hot light. Others guided the huge metal pieces into place, bringing them up from the floor of the cavern on long ropes and fitting them delicately.

With a peculiar dizzy sensation, Ciaran realized there was no more weight to the metal than if it were feathers.

He prayed they could get past those workers without being seen, or at least without having an alarm spread. The four of them crawled down past two or three groups of them safely, and then one man, working fairly close to the cliff, raised his head and stared straight at them.

Ciaran began to make frantic signs. The man paid no attention to them. Ciaran got a good look at his eyes. He let his hands drop.

"He doesn't see us," whispered Mouse slowly. "Is he blind?"

The man turned back to his work. It was an intricate fitting of small parts into a pierced frame. Work that in all his wanderings Ciaran had never seen done anywhere, in any fashion.

He shivered. "No. He just—doesn't see us."

The big hunter licked his lips nervously, like a beast in a deadfall. His eyes glittered. The hermit laughed without any sound. They went on.

It was the same all the way down. Men and women looked at them, but didn't see.

In one place they paused to let the slave-gang get farther ahead. There was a woman working not far out. She looked

like a starved cat, gaunt ribs showing through torn rags. Her face was twisted with the sheer effort of breathing, but there was no expression in her eyes.

Quite suddenly, in the middle of an unfinished gesture, she collapsed like wet leather and fell. Ciaran knew she was dead before her feet cleared the beam she was sitting on.

That happened twice more on the way down. Nobody paid any attention.

Mouse wiped moisture off her forehead and glared at Ciaran. "A fine place to spend a honeymoon. You and your lousy shortcuts!"

For once Ciaran had no impulse to cuff her.

THE last portion of the descent was covered by the backs of metal lean-tos full of heat and clamor. The four slipped away into dense shadow between two of them, crouched behind a mound of scrap. They had a good view of what happened to the slave gang.

The Kalds guided it out between massive pillars of white metal that held up the giant web overhead. Fires flared around the cliff foot. A hot blue-white glare beat down, partly from some unfamiliar light-sources fastened in the girders, partly from the mouths of furnaces hot beyond any heat Ciaran had ever dreamed of.

Men and women toiled sweating in the smoke and glare, and never looked at the newcomers in their chains. There were no guards.

The Kalds stopped the line in a clear space beyond the shacks and waited. They were all facing the same way, expectant, showing their bright grey teeth and rolling their blood-pink eyes.

Ciaran's gaze followed theirs. He got rigid suddenly, and the sweat on him turned cold as dew on a toad's back.

He thought at first it was a man, walking down between the pillars. It was man-shaped, tall and slender and strong, and sheathed from crown to heels in white mesh metal that shimmered like bright water.

But when it came closer he knew he was wrong. Some animal instinct in him knew even before his mind did. He wanted to snarl and put up his hackles, and tuck his tail and run.

THE creature was sexless. The flesh of its hands and face had a strange unreal texture, and a dusky yellow tinge that never came in living flesh.

Its face was human enough in shape—thin, with light angular bones. Only it was regular and perfect like something done carefully in marble, with no human softness or irregularity. The lips were bloodless. There was no hair, not even any eyelashes.

The eyes in that face were what set Ciaran's guts to knotting like a nest of cold snakes. They were not even remotely human. They were like pools of oil under the lashless lids—black, deep, impentrationable, without heart or soul or warmth.

But wise. Wise with a knowledge beyond humanity, and strong with a cold, terrible strength. And old. There were none of the usual signs of age. It was more than that. It was a psychic, unhuman feel of antiquity; a time that ran back and back and still back to an origin as unnatural as the body it spawned.

Ciaran knew what it was. He had made songs about the creature and sung them in crowded market-places and smoky wine-shops. He'd scared children with it, and made grown people shiver while they laughed.

He wasn't singing now. He wasn't laughing. He was looking at one of the androids of Bas the Imomrtal—a creature born of the mysterious power of the Stone, with no faintest link to humanity in its body or its brain.

Ciaran knew then whose mind had created the shining monster towering above them. And he knew more than ever that it was evil.

The android walked out onto a platform facing the slave-gang, so that it was above them, where they could all see. In its right hand it carried a staff of white metal with a round ball on top. The staff and the mesh-metal sheath it wore blazed bright silver in the glare.

The chained humans raised their heads. Ciaran saw the white scared glint of their eyeballs, heard the hard suck of breath and the uneasy clashing of link metal.

The Kalds made warning gestures with their wands, but they were watching the android.

It raised the staff suddenly, high over its head. The gesture put the ball top out of Ciaran's sight behind a girder. And then the lights dimmed and went out.

For a moment there was total darkness, except for the dull marginal glow of the forges and furnaces. Then, from behind the girder that hid the top of the staff a glorious opaline light burst out, filling the space between the giant pillars, reaching out and up into the dim air with banners of shimmering flame.

The Kalds crouched down in attitudes of worship, their blood-pink eyes like sentient coals. A trembling ran through the line of slaves, as though a wind had passed across them and shaken them like wheat. A few cried out, but the sounds were muffled quickly to silence. They stood still, staring up at the light.

The android neither moved nor spoke, standing like a silver lance.

Ciaran got up. He didn't know that he did it. He was distantly aware of Mouse beside him, breathing hard through an open mouth and catching opaline sparks in her black eyes. There was other movement, but he paid no attention.

He wanted to get closer to the light. He wanted to see what made it. He wanted to bathe in it. He could feel it pulsing in him, sparkling in his blood. He also wanted to run away, but the desire was stronger than the fear. It even made the fear rather pleasurable.

He was starting to climb over the pile of scrap when the android spoke. Its voice was light, clear, and carrying. There was nothing menacing about it. But it stopped Ciaran like a blow in the face, penetrating even through his semi-drugged yearning for the light.

He knew sound. He knew mood. He was sensitive to them as his own harp in the way he made his living. He felt what was in that voice; or rather, what wasn't in it. And he stopped, dead still.

It was a voice speaking out of a place where no emotion, as humanity knew the word, had ever existed. It came from a brain as alien and incomprehensible as darkness in a world of eternal light; a brain no human could ever touch or understand, except to feel the cold weight of its strength and cower as a beast cowers before the terrible mystery of fire.

"Sleep," said the android. "Sleep, and listen to my voice. Open your minds, and listen."

IV

THROUGH a swimming rainbow haze Ciaran saw the relaxed, dull faces of the slaves.

"You are nothing. You are no one. You exist only to serve; to work; to obey. Do you hear and understand?"

The line of humans swayed and made a small moaning sigh. It held nothing but amazement and desire. They repeated the litany through thick animal mouths.

"Your minds are open to mine. You will hear my thoughts. Once told, you will not forget. You will feel hunger and thirst, but not weariness. You will have no need to stop and rest, or sleep."

Again the litany. Ciaran passed a hand over his face. He was sweating. In spite of himself the light and the soulless, mesmerizing voice were getting him. He hit his own jaw with his knuckles, thanking whatever gods there were that the source of the light had been hidden from him. He knew he could never have bucked it.

More, perhaps, of the power of the Stone of Destiny?

A sudden sharp rattle of fragments brought his attention to the scrap heap. The hermit was already half way over it.

And Mouse was right at his heels.

Ciaran went after her. The rubble slipped and slid, and she was already out of reach. He called her name in desperation. She didn't hear him. She was hungry for the light.

Ciaran flung himself bodily over the rubbish. Out on the floor, the nearest Kalds were shaking off their daze of worship. The hermit was scrambling on all fours, like a huge grey cat.

Mouse's crimson tunic stayed just out of reach. Ciaran threw a handful of metal fragments at her back. She turned her head and snarled at him. She didn't see him. Almost as an automatic reflex she hurled some stuff at his face, but she didn't even slow down. The hermit cried out, a high, eerie scream.

A huge hand closed on Ciaran's ankle and hauled him back. He fought it, jabbing with the wand he still carried. A sec-

ond remorseless hand prisoned his wrist.

The red hunter said dispassionately, "They come. We go."

"Mouse! Let me go, damn you! *Mouse!*"

"You can't help her. We go, quick."

Ciaran went on kicking and thrashing.

The hunter banged him over the ear with exquisite judgment, took the wand out of his limp hand and tossed him over one vast shoulder. The light hadn't affected the hunter much. He'd been in deeper shadow than the others, and his half-animal nerves had warned him quicker even than Ciaran's. Being a wise wild thing, he had shut his eyes at once.

He doubled behind the metal sheds and began to run in dense shadow.

Ciaran heard and felt things from a great misty distance. He heard the hermit yell again, a crazy votive cry of worship. He felt the painful jarring of his body and smelled the animal rankness of the hunter.

He heard Mouse scream, just once.

He tried to move; to get up and do something. The hunter slammed him hard across the kidneys. Ciaran was aware briefly that the lights were coming on again. After that it got very dark and very quiet.

The hunter breathed in his ear, "Quiet! Don't move."

There wasn't much chance of Ciaran doing anything. The hunter lay on top of him with one freckled paw covering most of his face. Ciaran gasped and rolled his eyes.

They lay in a troughed niche of rough stone. There was black shadow on them from an overhang, but the blue glare burned beyond it. Even as he watched it dimmed and flickered and then steadied again.

High up over his head the shining metal monster reached for the roof of the cavern. It had grown. It had grown enormously, and a mechanism was taking shape inside it; a maze of delicate rods and crystal prisms, of wheels and balances and things Ciaran hadn't any name for.

Then he remembered about Mouse, and nothing else mattered.

The hunter lay on him, crushing him to silence. Ciaran's blue eyes blazed. He'd have killed the hunter then, if there had been any way to do it. There wasn't. Presently he stopped fighting.

Again the red giant breathed in his ear: "Look over the edge."

He took his hand away. Very, very quietly, Ciaran raised his head a few inches and looked over.

Their niche was some fifteen feet above the floor of the pit. Below and to the right was the mouth of a square tunnel. The crowded, sweating confusion of the forges and workshops spread out before them, with people swarming like ants after a rain.

Standing at the tunnel mouth were two creatures in shining metal sheathes—the androids of Bas the Immortal.

THEIR clear, light voices rose up to where Ciaran and the hunter lay.

"Did you find out?"

"Failing—as we judged. Otherwise, no change."

"No change." One of the slim unhumans turned and looked with its depthless black eyes at the soaring metal giant. "If we can only finish it in time!"

The other said, "We can, Khafre. We must."

Khafre made a quick, impatient gesture. "We need more slaves! These human cattle are frail. You drive them, and they die."

"The Kalds . . ."

"Are doing what they can. Two more chains have just come. But it's still not enough to be safe! I've told the beasts to raid farther in, even to the border cities if they have to."

"It won't help if the humans attack us before we're done."

Khafre laughed. There was nothing pleasant or remotely humorous about it.

"If they could track the Kalds this far, we could handle them easily. After we're finished, of course, they'll be subjugated anyway."

The other nodded. Faintly uneasy, it said, "If we finish in time. If we don't . . ."

"If we don't," said Khafre, "none of it matters, to them or us or the Immortal Bas." Something that might have been a shudder passed over its shining body. Then it threw back its head and laughed again, high and clear.

"But we will finish it, Steud! We're unique in the universe, and nothing can stop us. This means the end of boredom, of servitude and imprisonment. With this

world in our hands, nothing can stop us!"

Steud whispered, "Nothing!" Then they moved away, disappearing into the seething clamor of the floor.

The red hunter said, "What were they talking about?"

Ciaran shook his head. His eyes were hard and curiously remote. "I don't know."

"I don't like the smell of it, little man. It's bad."

"Yeah." Ciaran's voice was very steady. "What happened to Mouse?"

"She was taken with the others. Believe me, little man—I had to do what I did or they'd have taken you, too. There was nothing you could do to help her."

"She—followed the light."

"I think so. But I had to run fast."

There was a mist over Ciaran's sight. His heart was slugging him. Not because he particularly cared, he asked, "How did we get away? I thought I saw the big lights come on . . ."

"They did. And then they went off again, all of a sudden. They weren't expecting it. I had a head start. The grey beasts hunt by scent, but in that stewpot there are too many scents. They lost us, and when the lights came on again I saw this niche and managed to climb to it without being seen."

He looked out over the floor, scratching his red beard. "I think they're too busy to bother about two people. No, three." He chuckled. "The hermit got away, too. He ran past me in the dark, screaming like an ape about revelations and The Light. Maybe they've got him again by now."

C IARAN wasn't worrying about the hermit. "Subjugation," he said slowly. "With this word in their hands, nothing can stop them." He looked out across the floor of the pit. No guards. You didn't need any guards when you had a weapon like that light. Frail human cattle driven till they died, and not knowing about it nor caring.

The world in their hands. An empty shell for them to play with, to use as they wanted. No more market places, no more taverns, no more songs. No more little people living their little lives the way they wanted to. Just slaves with blank faces, herded by grey beasts with shining wands and held by the android's light.

He didn't know why the androids wanted the world or what they were going to do with it. He only knew that the whole thing made him sick—sick all through, in a way he'd never felt before.

The fact that what he was going to do was hopeless and crazy never occurred to him. Nothing occurred to him, except that somewhere in that seething slave-pen Mouse was laboring, with eyes that didn't see and a brain that was only an open channel for orders. Pretty soon, like the woman up on the girder, she was going to hit her limit and die.

Ciaran said abruptly, "If you want to kill a snake, what do you do?"

"Cut off its head, of course."

Ciaran got his feet under him. "The Stone of Destiny," he whispered. "The power of life and death. Do you believe in legends?"

The hunter shrugged. "I believe in my hands. They're all I know."

"I'm going to need your hands, to help me break one legend and build another!"

"They're yours, little man. Where do we go?"

"Down that tunnel. Because, if I'm not clear off, that leads to Ben Beatha, and Bas the Immortal—and the Stone."

Almost as though it were a signal, the blue glare dimmed and flickered. In the semi-darkness Ciaran and the hunter dropped down from the niche and went into the tunnel.

It was dark, with only a tiny spot of blue radiance at wide intervals along the walls. They had gone quite a distance before these strengthened to their normal brightness, and even then it was fairly dark. It seemed to be deserted.

The hunter kept stopping to listen. When Ciaran asked irritably what was wrong, he said:

"I think there's someone behind us. I'm not sure."

"Well, give him a jab with the wand if he gets too close. Hurry up!"

The tunnel led straight toward Ben Beatha, judging from its position in the pit. Ciaran was almost running when the hunter caught his shoulder urgently.

"Wait! There's movement up ahead..."

He motioned Ciaran down. On their hands and knees they crawled forward, holding their wands ready.

A slight bend in the tunnel revealed a fork. One arm ran straight ahead. The other bent sharply upward, toward the surface.

There were four Kalds crouched on the rock between them, playing some obscure game with human finger bones.

Ciaran got his weight over his toes and moved fast. The hunter went beside him. Neither of them made a sound. The Kalds were intent on their game and not expecting trouble.

The two men might have got away with it, only that suddenly from behind them, someone screamed like an angry cat.

C IARAN'S head jerked around, just long enough to let him see the hermit standing in the tunnel, with his stringy arms lifted and his grey hair flying, and a light of pure insanity blazing in his pale eyes.

"Evil!" he shrieked. "You are evil to defy The Light, and the servants of The Light!"

He seemed to have forgotten all about calling the Kalds demons a little while before.

The grey beasts leaped up, moving quickly in with their wands ready. Ciaran yelled with sheer fury. He went for them, the rags of his yellow tunic streaming.

He wasn't quite clear about what happened after that. There was a lot of motion, grey bodies leaping and twisting and jewel-tips flashing. Something flicked him stunningly across the temple. He fought in a sort of detached fog where everything was blurred and distant. The hermit went on screaming about Evil and The Light. The hunter bellowed a couple of times, things thudded and crashed, and once Ciaran poked his wand straight into a blood-pink eye.

Sometime right after that there was a confused rush of running feet back in the tunnel. The hunter was down. And Ciaran found himself running up the incline, because the other way was suddenly choked with Kalds.

He got away. He was never sure how. Probably instinct warned him to go in time so that, in the confusion he was out of sight before the reinforcements saw him. Three of the original four Kalds were down and the fourth was busy with the

hermit. Anyway, for the moment, he made it.

When he staggered finally from the mouth of the ramp, drenched with sweat and gasping, he was back on the Forbidden Plain, and Ben Beatha towered above him—a great golden Titan reaching for the red sky.

The tumbled yellow rock of its steep slopes was barren of any growing thing. There were no signs of buildings, or anything built by hands, human or otherwise. High up, almost in the apex of the triangular peak, was a square, balconied opening that might have been only a wind-eroded niche in the cliff-face.

Ciaran stood on widespread legs, studying the mountain with sullen stubborn eyes. He believed in legend, now. It was all he believed in. Somewhere under the golden peak was the Stone of Destiny and the demigod who was its master.

Behind him were the creatures of that demigod, and the monster they were building—and a little black-haired Mouse who was going to die unless something was done about it.

A lot of other people, too. A whole sane comfortable world. But Mouse was about all he could handle, just then.

He wasn't Ciaran the bard any longer. He wasn't a human, attached to a normal human world. He moved in a strange land of gods and demons, where everything was as mad as a drunkard's nightmare, and Mouse was the only thing that held him at all to the memory of a life wherein men and women fought and laughed and loved.

His scarred mouth twitched and tightened. He started off across the rolling, barren rise to Ben Beatha—a tough, bandy-legged little man in yellow rags, with a brown, expressionless face and a forgotten harp slung between his shoulders, moving at a steady gypsy lope.

A wind sighed over the Forbidden Plain, rolling the sunballs in the red sky. And then, from the crest of Ben Beatha, the darkness came.

This time Ciaran didn't stop to be afraid. There was nothing left inside him to be afraid with. He remembered the hermit's words: *Judgment. Great things moving. Doom and destruction, a shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying.* Something of the same feeling came to him,

but he wasn't human any longer. He was beyond fear. Fate moved, and he was part of it.

Stones and shale tricked his feet in the darkness. All across the Forbidden Plains there was night and a wailing wind and a sharp chill of cold. Far, far away there was a faint red glow on the sky where the sea burned with its own fire.

Ciaran went on.

Overhead, then, the sunballs began to flicker. Little striving ripples of light went out across them, lighting the barrens with an eerie witch-glow. The flickering was worse than the darkness. It was like the last struggling pulse of a dying man's heart. Ciaran was aware of a coldness in him beyond the chill of the wind.

A shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying . . .

He began to climb Ben Beatha.

V

THE stone was rough and fairly broken, and Ciaran had climbed mountains before. He crawled upward, through the sick light and the cold wind that screamed and fought him harder the higher he got. He retained no very clear memory of the climb. Only after a long, long time he fell inward over the wall of a balcony and lay still.

He was bleeding from rock-tears and his heart kicked him like the heel of a vicious horse. But he didn't care. The balcony was man-made, the passage back of it led somewhere—and the light had come back in the sky.

It wasn't quite the same, though. It was weaker, and less warm.

When he could stand up he went in along the passage, square-hewn in the living rock of Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life.

It led straight in, lighted by a soft opaline glow from hidden light-sources. Presently it turned at right angles and became a spiral ramp, leading down.

Corridors led back from it at various levels, but Ciaran didn't bother about them. They were dark, and the dust of ages lay unmarked on their floors.

Down and down, a long, long way. Silence. The deep uncaring silence of death and the eternal rock—dark titans who watched the small furious ant-scurryings

of man and never, never, for one moment, gave a damn.

And then the ramp flattened into a broad high passage cut deep in the belly of the mountain. And the passage led to a door of gold, twelve feet high and intricately graved and pierced, set with symbols that Ciaran had heard of only in legend: the *Hun-Lahun-Mehen*, the Snake, the Circle, and the Cross, blazing in hot jewel-fires.

But above them, crushing and dominant on both valves of the great door, was the *crux ansata*, the symbol of eternal life, cut from some lustreless stone so black it was like a pattern of blindness on the eyeball.

Ciaran shivered and drew a deep, unsteady breath. One brief moment of human terror came to him. Then he set his two hands on the door and pushed it open.

He came into a small room hung with tapestries and lighted dimly by the same opaline glow as the hallway. The half-seen pictures showed men and beasts and battles against a background at once tantalizingly familiar and frighteningly alien.

There was a rug on the floor. It was made from the head and hide of a creature Ciaran had never even dreamed of before—a thing like a huge tawny cat with a dark mane and great, shining fangs.

Ciaran padded softly across it and pushed aside the heavy curtains at the other end.

AT FIRST there was only darkness. It seemed to fill a large space; Ciaran had an instinctive feeling of size. He went out into it, very cautiously, and then his eyes found a pale glow ahead in the blackness, as though someone had crushed a pearl with his thumb and smeared it across the dark.

He was a thief and a gypsy. He made no more sound than a wisp of cloud, drifting toward it. His feet touched a broad, shallow step, and then another. He climbed, and the pearly glow grew stronger and became a curving wall of radiance.

He stopped just short of touching it, on a level platform high above the floor. He squinted against its curdled, milky thickness, trying to see through.

Wrapped in the light, cradled and protected by it like a bird in the heart of a shining cloud, a boy slept on a couch made soft with furs and colored silks. He was quite naked, his limbs flung out carelessly

with the slim angular grace of his youth. His skin was white as milk, catching a pale warmth from the light.

He slept deeply. He might almost have been dead, except for the slight rise and fall of his breathing. His head was rolled over so that he faced Ciaran, his cheek pillowed on his upflung arm.

His hair, thick, curly, and black almost to blueness, had grown out long across his forearm, across the white fur beneath it, and down onto his wide slim shoulders. The nails of his lax hand, palm up above his head, stood up through the hair. They were inches long.

His face was just a boy's face. A good face, even rather handsome, with strong bone just beginning to show under the roundness. His cheek was still soft as a girl's, the lashes of his closed lids dark and heavy.

He looked peaceful, even happy. His mouth was curved in a vague smile, as though his dreams were pleasant. And yet there was something there . . .

A shadow. Something unseen and untouchable, something as fragile as the note of a shepherd's pipe brought from far off on a vagrant breeze. Something as indescribable as death—and as broodingly powerful. Ciaran sensed it, and his nerves throbbed suddenly like the strings of his own harp.

He saw then that the couch the boy slept on was a huge *crux ansata*, cut from the dead-black stone, with the arms stretching from under his shoulders and the loop like a monstrous halo above his head.

The legends whispered through Ciaran's head. The songs, the tales, the folklore. The symbolism, and the image-patterns.

Bas the Immortal was always described as a giant, like the mountain he lived in, and old, because Immortal suggests age. Awe, fear, and unbelief spoke through those legends, and the child-desire to build tall. But there was an older legend . . .

Ciaran, because he was a gypsy and a thief and had music in him like a drunkard has wine, had heard it, deep in the black forests of Hyperborea where even gypsies seldom go. The oldest legend of all—the tale of the Shining Youth from Beyond, who walked in beauty and power, who never grew old, and who carried in his

heart a bitter darkness that no man could understand.

The Shining Youth from Beyond. A boy sleeping with a smile on his face, walled in living light.

Ciaran stood still, staring. His face was loose and quite blank. His heartbeats shook him slightly, and his breath had a rusty sound in his open mouth.

After a long time he started forward, into the light.

It struck him, hurled him back numbed and dazed. Thinking of Mouse, he tried it twice more before he was convinced. Then he tried yelling. His voice crashed back at him from the unseen walls, but the sleeping boy never stirred, never altered even the rhythm of his breathing.

After that Ciaran crouched in the awful laxness of impotency, and thought about Mouse, and cried.

Then, quite suddenly, without any warning at all, the wall of light vanished.

HE DIDN'T believe it. But he put his hand out again, and nothing stopped it, so he rushed forward in the pitch blackness until he hit the stone arm of the cross. And behind him, and all around him, the light began to glow again.

Only now it was different. It flickered and dimmed and struggled, like something fighting not to die. Like something else . . .

Like the sunballs. Like the light in the sky that meant life to a world. Flickering and feeble like an old man's heart, the last frightened wing-beats of a dying bird . . .

A terror took Ciaran by the throat and stopped the breath in it, and turned his body colder than a corpse. He watched . . .

The light glowed and pulsed, and grew stronger. Presently he was walled in by it, but it seemed fainter than before.

A terrible feeling of urgency came over Ciaran, a need for haste. The words of the androids came back to him: *Failing, as we judged. If we finish in time. If we don't, none of it matters.*

A shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying. Mouse slaving with empty eyes to build a shining monster that would harness the world to the wills of non-human brains.

It didn't make sense, but it meant something. Something deadly important. And the key to the whole mad jumble was here

—a dark-haired boy dreaming on a stone cross.

Ciaran moved closer. He saw then that the boy had stirred, very slightly, and that his face was troubled. It was as though the dimming of the light had disturbed him. Then he sighed and smiled again, nestling his head deeper into the bend of his arm.

"Bas," said Ciaran. "Lord Bas!"

His voice sounded hoarse and queer. The boy didn't hear him. He called again, louder. Then he put his hand on one slim white shoulder and shook it hesitantly at first, and then hard, and harder.

The boy Bas didn't even flicker his eyelids.

Ciaran beat his fists against the empty air and cursed without any voice. Then, almost instinctively, he crouched on the stone platform and took his harp in his hands.

It wasn't because he expected to do anything with it. It was simply that harping was as natural to him as breathing, and what was inside him had to come out some way. He wasn't thinking about music. He was thinking about Mouse, and it just added up to the same thing.

Random chords at first, rippling up against the wall of milky light. Then the agony in him began to run out through his finger-tips onto the strings, and he sent it thrumming strong across the still air. It sang wild and savage, but underneath it there was the sound of his own heart breaking, and the fall of tears.

There was no time. There wasn't even any Ciaran. There was only the harp crying a dirge for a black-haired Mouse and the world she lived in. Nothing mattered but that. Nothing would ever matter.

Then finally there wasn't anything left for the harp to cry about. The last quiver of the strings went throbbing off into a dull emptiness, and there was only an ugly little man in yellow rags crouched silent by a stone cross, hiding his face in his hands.

Then, faint and distant, like the echo of words spoken in another world, another time:

Don't draw the veil. Marsali—don't . . .!

Ciaran looked up, stiffening. The boy's lips moved. His face, the eyes still closed, was twisted in an agony of

pleading. His hands were raised, reaching, trying to hold something that slipped through his fingers like mist.

Dark mist. The mist of dreams. It was still in his eyes when he opened them. Grey eyes, clouded and veiled, and then with the dream-mist thickening into tears . . .

He cried out, "*Marsali!*" as though his heart was ripped out of him with the breath that said it. Then he lay still on the couch, his eyes, staring unfocused at the milky light, with the tears running out of them.

Ciaran said softly, "Lord Bas . . ."

"Awake," whispered the boy. "I'm awake again. Music—a harp crying out . . . I didn't want to wake! Oh, God, I didn't want to!"

He sat up suddenly. The rage, the sheer blind fury in his young face rocked Ciaran like the blow of a fist.

"Who waked me? Who dared to wake me?"

There was no place to run. The light held him. And there was Mouse. Ciaran said:

"I did, Lord Bas. There was need to."

The boy's grey eyes came slowly to focus on his face. Ciaran's heart kicked once and stopped beating. A great cold stillness breathed from somewhere beyond the world and walled him in, closer and tighter than the milky light. Close and tight, like the packed earth of a grave.

A boy's face, round and smooth and soft. No shadow even of down on the cheeks, the lips still pink and girlish. Long dark lashes, and under them . . .

Grey eyes. Old with suffering, old with pain, old with an age beyond human understanding. Eyes that had seen birth and life and death in an endless stream, flowing by just out of reach, just beyond hearing. Eyes looking out between the bars of a private hell that was never built for any man before.

One strong young hand reached down among the furs and silks and felt for something, and Ciaran knew the thing was death.

Ciaran, suddenly, was furious himself.

He struck a harsh, snarling chord on the harpstrings, thinking of Mouse. He poured his fury out in bitter, pungent words, the gypsy argot of the Quarters, and all the time Bas fumbled to get the hidden weapon in his hands.

It was the long nails that saved Ciaran's

life. They kept Bas from closing his fingers, and in the meantime some of Ciaran's vibrant rage had penetrated. Bas whispered:

"You love a woman."

"Yeah," said Ciaran. "Yeah."

"So do I. A woman I created, and made to live in my dreams. Do you know what you did when you waked me?"

"Maybe I saved the world. If the legends are right, you built it. You haven't any right to let it die so you can sleep."

"I built another world, little man. Marsali's world. I don't want to leave it." He bent forward, toward Ciaran. "I was happy in that world. I built it to suit me. I belong in it. Do you know why? Because it's made from my own dreams, as I want it. Even the people. Even Marsali. Even myself.

"They drove me away from one world. I built another, but it was no different. I'm not human. I don't belong with humans, nor in any world they live in. So I learned to sleep, and dream."

He lay back on the couch. He looked pitifully young, with the long lashes hiding his eyes.

"Go away. Let your little world crumble. It's doomed anyway. What difference do a few life-spans make in eternity? Let me sleep."

CIARAN struck the harp again. "*No!* Listen . . ."

He told Bas about the slave-gangs, the androids, the shining monster in the pit—and the darkness that swept over the world. It was the last that caught the boy's attention.

He sat up slowly. "Darkness? You! How did you get to me, past the light?"

Ciaran told him.

"The Stone of Destiny," whispered the Immortal. Suddenly he laughed. He laughed to fill the whole dark space beyond the light; terrible laughter, full of hate and a queer perverted triumph.

He stopped, as suddenly as he had begun, and spread his hands flat on the colored silks, the long nails gleaming like knives. His eyes widened, grey windows into a deep hell, and his voice was no more than a breath.

"Could that mean that I will die, too?"

Ciaran's scarred mouth twitched. "The Stone of Destiny . . ."

The boy leaped up from his couch. His hand swept over some hidden control in the arm of the stone cross, and the milky light died out. At the same time, an opaline glow suffused the darkness beyond.

Bas the Immortal ran down the steps—a dark-haired, graceful boy running naked in the heart of an opal.

Ciaran followed.

They came to the hollow core of Ben Beatha—a vast pyramidal space cut in the yellow rock. Bas stopped, and Ciaran stopped behind him.

The whole space was laced and twined and webbed with crystal. Rods of it, screens of it, meshes of it. A shining helix ran straight up overhead, into a shaft that seemed to go clear through to open air.

In the crystal, pulsing along it like the life-blood in a man's veins, there was light.

It was like no light Ciaran had ever seen before. It was no color, and every color. It seared the eye with heat, and yet it was cold and pure like still water. It throbbed and beat. It was alive.

Ciaran followed the crystal maze down and down, to the base of it. There, in the very heart of it, lying at the hub of a shining web, lay *something*.

Like a black hand slammed across the eyeballs, darkness fell.

For a moment he was blind, and through the blindness came a soft whisper of movement. Then there was light again; a vague smeared spot of it on the pitch black.

It glowed and faded and glowed again. The rusty gleam slid across the half-crouched body of Bas the Immortal, pressed close against the crystal web. It caught in his eyes, turning them hot and lambent like beast-eyes in the dark of a cave-mouth.

Little sparks of hell-fire in a boy's face, staring at the Stone of Destiny.

A stone no bigger than a man's heart, with power in it. Even dying, it had power. Power to build a world, or smash it. Power never born of Ciaran's planet, or any planet, but something naked and perfect—an egg from the womb of space itself.

It fought to live, lying in its crystal web. It was like watching somebody's heart stripped clean and struggling to beat.

The fire in it flickered and flared, sending pale witch-lights dancing up along the crystal maze.

Outside, Ciaran knew, all across the world, the sunballs were pulsing and flickering to the dying beat of the Stone.

Bas whispered, "It's over. Over and done."

WITHOUT knowing it, Ciaran touched the harpstrings and made them shudder. "The legends were right, then. The Stone of Destiny kept the world alive."

"Alive. It gave light and warmth, and before that it powered the ship that brought me here across space, from the third planet of our sun to the tenth. It sealed the gaps in the planet's crust and drove the machinery that filled the hollow core inside with air. It was my strength. It built my world; *my* world, where I would be loved and respected—all right, and worshipped!"

He laughed, a small bitter sob.

"A child I was. After all those centuries, still a child playing with a toy."

His voice rang out louder across the flickering dimness. A boy's voice, clear and sweet. He wasn't talking to Ciaran. He wasn't even talking to himself. He was talking to Fate, and cursing it.

"I took a walk one morning. That was all I did. I was just a fisherman's son walking on the green hills of Atlantis above the sea. That was all I wanted to be—a fisherman's son, someday to be a fisherman myself, with sons of my own. And then from nowhere, out of the sky, the meteorite fell. There was thunder, and a great light, and then darkness. And when I woke again I was a god.

"I took the Stone of Destiny out of its broken shell. The light from it burned in me, and I was a god. And I was happy. *I didn't know.*

"I was too young to be a god. A boy who never grew older. A boy who wanted to play with other boys, and couldn't. A boy who wanted to age, to grow a beard and a man's voice, and find a woman to live. It was hell, after the thrill wore off. It was worse, when my mind and heart grew up, and my body didn't.

"And they said I was no god, but a blasphemy, a freak.

"The priests of Dagon, of all the tem-

ples of Atlantis, spoke against me. I had to run away. I roamed the whole earth before the Flood, carrying the Stone. Sometimes I ruled for centuries, a god-king, but always the people tired of me and rose against me. They hated me, because I lived forever and never grew old.

"A man they might have accepted. But a boy! A brain with all the wisdom it could borrow from time, grown so far from theirs that it was hard to talk to them—and a body too young even for the games of manhood!

Ciaran stood frozen, shrinking from the hell in the boy-God's agonized voice.

"So I grew to hate them, and when they drove me out I turned on them, and used the power of the Stone to destroy. I know what happened to the cities of the Gobi, to Angkor, and the temples of Mayapan! So the people hated me more because they feared me more, and I was alone. No one has ever been alone as I was.

"So I built my own world, here in the heart of a dead planet. And in the end it was the same, because the people were human and I was not. I created the androids, freaks like myself, to stand between me and my people—my own creatures, that I could trust. And I built a third world, in my dreams.

"And now the Stone of Destiny has come to the end of its strength. Its atoms are eaten away by its own fire. The world it powered will die. And what will happen to me? I will I go on living, even after my body is frozen in the cold dark?"

Silence, then. The pulsing beat of light in the crystal rods. The heart of a world on its deathbed.

Ciaran's harp crashed out. It made the crystal sing. His voice came with it:

"Bas! The monster in the pit, that the androids are building—I know now what it is! They knew the Stone was dying. They're going to have power of their own, and take the world. You can't let them, Bas! You brought us here. We're your people. You can't let the androids have us!"

The boy laughed, a low, bitter sound. "What do I care for your world or your people? I only want to sleep." He caught his breath in and turned around, as though he was going back to the place of the stone cross.

CiARAN stroked the harpstrings. "Wait . . ." It was all humanity crying out of the harp. Little people, lost and frightened and pleading for help. No voice could have said what it said. It was Ciaran himself, a channel for the unthinkable pain inside him.

"Wait—You were human once. You were young. You laughed and quarrelled and ate and slept, and you were free. That's all we ask. Just those things. Remember Bas the fisherman's son, and help us!"

Grey eyes looking at him. Grey eyes looking from a boy's face. "How could I help you even if I wanted to?"

"There's some power left in the Stone. And the androids are your creatures. You made them. You can destroy them. If you could do it before they finish this thing—from the way they spoke, they mean to destroy you with it."

Bas laughed.

Ciaran's hand struck a terrible chord from the harp, and fell away.

Bas said heavily, "They'll draw power from the gravitic force of the planet and broadcast it the same way. It will never stop as long as the planet spins. If they finish it in time, the world will live. If they don't . . ." He shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"So," whispered Ciaran, "we have a choice of a quick death, or a lingering one. We can die free, on our own feet, or we can die slaves." His voice rose to a full-throated shout. "*God! You're no god!* You're a selfish brat sulking in a corner. All right, go back to your Marsali! And I'll play god for a minute."

He raised the harp.

"I'll play god, and give 'em the clean way out!"

He drew his arm back to throw—to smash the crystal web. And then, with blinding suddenness, there was light again.

They stood frozen, the two of them, blinking in the hot opalescence. Then their eyes were drawn to the crystal web.

The Stone of Destiny still fluttered like a dying heart, and the crystal rods were dim.

Ciaran whispered, "It's too late. They're finished."

Silence again. They stood almost as

though they were waiting for something, hardly breathing, with Ciaran still holding the silent harp in his hand.

Very, very faintly, under his fingers, the strings began to thrum.

Vibration. In a minute Ciaran could hear it in the crystal. It was like the buzz and strum of insects just out of earshot. He said:

"What's that?"

The boy's ears were duller than his. But presently he smiled and said, "So that's how they're going to do it. Vibration, that will shake Ben Beatha into a cloud of dust, and me with it. They must believe I'm still asleep." He shrugged. "What matter? It's death."

Ciaran slung the harp across his back. There was a curious finality in the action.

"There's a way from here into the pit. Where is it?"

Bas pointed across the open space. Ciaran started walking. He didn't say anything.

Bas said, "Where are you going?"

"Back to Mouse," said Ciaran simply.

"To die with her." The crystal maze hummed eerily. "I wish I could see Marsali again."

C IARAN stopped. He spoke over his shoulder, without expression. "The death of the Stone doesn't mean your death, does it?"

"No. The first exposure to its light when it landed, blazing with the heat of friction, made permanent changes in the cell structure of my body. I'm independent of it—as the androids are of the culture vats they grew in."

"And the new power source will take up where the Stone left off?"

"Yes. Even the wall of rays that protected me and fed my body while I slept will go on. The power of the Stone was broadcast to it, and to the sunballs. There were no mechanical leads."

Ciaran said softly, "And you love this Marsali? You're happy in this dream world you created? You could go back there?"

"Yes," whispered Bas. "Yes. Yes!"

Ciaran turned. "Then help us destroy the androids. Give us our world, and we'll

give you yours. If we fail—well, we have nothing to lose."

Silence. The crystal web hummed and sang—death whispering across the world. The Stone of Destiny throbbed like the breast of a dying bird. The boy's grey eyes were veiled and remote. It seemed almost that he was asleep.

Then he smiled—the drowsy smile of pleasure he had worn when Ciaran found him, dreaming on the stone cross.

"Marsali," he whispered. "Marsali."

He moved forward then, reaching out across the crystal web. The long nails on his fingers scooped up the Stone of Destiny, cradled it, caged it in.

Bas the Immortal said, "Let's go, little man."

Ciaran didn't say anything. He looked at Bas. His eyes were wet. Then he got the harp in his hands again and struck it, and the thundering chords shook the crystal maze to answering music.

It drowned the faint death-whisper. And then, caught between two vibrations, the shining rods split and fell, with a shiver of sound like the ringing of distant bells.

Ciaran turned and went down the passage to the pit. Behind him came the dark-haired boy with the Stone of Destiny in his hands.

They came along the lower arm of the fork where Ciaran and the hunter had fought the Kalds. There were four of the grey beasts still on guard.

Ciaran had pulled the wand from his girdle. The Kalds started up, and Ciaran got ready to fight them. But Bas said, "Wait."

He stepped forward. The Kalds watched him with their blood-pink eyes, yawning and whimpering with animal nervousness. The boy's dark gaze burned. The grey brutes cringed and shivered and then dropped flat, hiding their faces against the stone.

"Telepaths," said Bas to Ciaran, "and obedient to the strongest mind. The androids know that. The Kalds weren't put there to stop me physically, but to send the androids warning if I came."

Ciaran shivered. "So they'll be waiting."

"Yes, little man. They'll be waiting."

They went down the long tunnel and stepped out on the floor of the pit.

IT WAS curiously silent. The fires had died in the forges. There was no sound of hammering, no motion. Only blazing lights and a great stillness, like someone holding his breath. There was no one in sight.

The metal monster climbed up the pit. It was finished now. The intricate maze of grids and balances in its belly murmured with the strength that spun up through it from the core of the planet. It was like a vast spider, making an invisible thread of power to wrap around the world and hold it, to be sucked dry.

An army of Kalds began to move on silent feet, out from the screening tangle of sheds and machinery.

The androids weren't serious about that. It was just a skirmish, a test to see whether Bas had been weakened by his age-long sleep. He hadn't been. The Kalds looked at the Stone of Destiny and from there to Bas' grey eyes, cringed, whimpered, and lay flat.

Bas whispered, "Their minds are closed to me, but I can feel—the androids are working, preparing some trap . . ."

His eyes were closed now, his young face set with concentration. "They don't want me to see, but my mind is older than theirs, and better trained, and I have the power of the Stone. I can see a control panel. It directs the force of their machine . . ."

He began to move, then, rapidly, out across the floor. His eyes were still closed. It seemed he didn't need them for seeing.

People began to come out from behind the sheds and the cooling forges. Blank-faced people with empty eyes. Many of them, making a wall of themselves against Bas.

Ciaran cried out, "*Mouse . . . !*"

She was there. Her body was there, thin and erect in the crimson tunic. Her black hair was still wild around her small brown face. But Mouse, the Mouse that Ciaran knew, was dead behind her dull black eyes. Ciaran whispered, "*Mouse . . .*"

The slaves flowed in and held the two of them, clogged in a mass of unresponsive bodies.

"Can't you free them, Bas?"

"Not yet. Not now. There isn't time."

"Can't you do with them what you did with the Kalds?"

"The androids control their minds through hypnosis. If I fought that control, the struggle would blast their minds to death or idiocy. And there isn't time . . ." There was sweat on his smooth young forehead. "I've got to get through. I don't want to kill them . . ."

Ciaran looked at Mouse. "No," he said hoarsely.

"But I may have to, unless . . . Wait! I can channel the power of the Stone through my own brain, because there's an affinity between us. Vibration, cell to cell. The androids won't have made a definite command against music. Perhaps I can jar their minds open, just enough, so that you can call them with your harp, as you called me."

A tremor almost of pain ran through the boy's body.

"Lead them away, Ciaran. Lead them as far as you can. Otherwise many of them will die. And hurry!"

Bas raised the Stone of Destiny in his clasped hands and pressed it to his forehead. And Ciaran took his harp.

He was looking at Mouse when he set the strings to singing. That was why it wasn't hard to play as he did. It was something from him to Mouse. A prayer. A promise. His heart held out on a song.

The music rippled out across the packed mass of humanity. At first they didn't hear it. Then there was a stirring and a sigh, a dumb, blind reaching. Somewhere the message was getting through the darkness clouding their minds. A message of hope. A memory of red sunlight on green hills, of laughter and home and love.

Ciaran let the music die to a whisper under his fingers, and the people moved forward, toward him, wanting to hear.

He began to walk away, slowly, trailing the harp-song over his shoulder—and they followed. Haltingly, in twos and threes, until the whole mass broke and flowed like water in his wake.

Bas was gone, his slim young body slipping fast through the broken ranks of the crowd.

Ciaran caught one more glimpse of Mouse before he lost her among the others. She was crying, without knowing or remembering why.

If Bas died, if Bas was defeated, she would never know nor remember.

CIARAN led them as far as he could, clear to the wall of the pit. He stopped playing. They stopped, too, standing like cattle, looking at nothing, with eyes turned inward to their clouded dreams.

Ciaran left them there, running out alone across the empty floor.

He followed the direction Bas had taken. He ran, fast, but it was like a nightmare where you run and run and never get anywhere. The lights glared down and the metal monster sighed and churned high up over his head, and there was no other sound, no other movement but his own.

Then, abruptly, the lights went out.

He stumbled on, hitting brutally against unseen pillars, falling and scrambling in scrap heaps. And after an eternity he saw light again, up ahead.

The Light he had seen before, here in the pit. The glorious opalescent light that drew a man's mind and held it fast to be chained.

Ciaran crept in closer.

There was a control panel on a stone dais—a meaningless jumbled mass of dials and wires. The androids stood before it. One of them was bent over, its yellowish hands working delicately with the controls. The other stood erect beside it, holding a staff. The metal ball at the top was open, spilling the opalescent blaze into the darkness.

Ciaran crouched in the shelter of a pillar, shielding his eyes. Even now he wanted to walk into that light and be its slave.

The android with the staff said harshly, "Can't you find the wave length? He should have been dead by now."

The bending one tensed and then straightened, the burning light sparkling across its metal sheath. Its eyes were black and limitless, like evil itself, and no more human.

"Yes," it said. "I have it."

The light began to burst stronger from the staff, a swirling dangerous fury of it.

Ciaran was hardly breathing. The light-source, whatever it was, was part of the power of the Stone of Destiny. Wave lengths meant nothing to him, but it seemed the danger was to the Stone—and Bas carried it.

The android touched the staff. The light died, clipped off as the metal ball closed.

"If there's any power left in the Stone," it whispered, "our power-wave will blast its subatomic reserve—and Bas the Immortal with it!"

Silence. And then in the pitch darkness a coal began to glow.

It came closer. It grew brighter, and a smudged reflection behind and above it became the head and shoulders of Bas the Immortal.

The android whispered, "Stronger! Hurry!"

A yellowish hand made a quick adjustment. The Stone of Destiny burned brighter. It burst with light. It was like a sunball, stabbing its hot fury into the darkness.

The android whispered, "More!"

The Stone filled all the pit with a deadly blaze of glory.

Bas stopped, looking up at the dais. He grinned. A naked boy, beautiful with youth, his grey eyes veiled and sleepy under dark lashes.

He threw the Stone of Destiny up on the dais. An idle boy tossing stones at a treetop.

Light. An explosion of it, without sound, without physical force. Ciaran dropped flat on his face behind the pillar. After a long time he raised his head again. The overhead lights were on, and Bas stood on the dais beside two twisted, shining lumps of man-made soulless men.

The android flesh had taken the radiation as leather takes heat, warping, twisting, turning black.

"Poor freaks," said Bas softly. "They were like me, with no place in the universe that belonged to them. So they dreamed, too—only their dreams were evil."

He stooped and picked up something—a dull, dark stone, a thing with no more life nor light than a waterworn pebble.

He sighed and rolled it once between his palms, and let it drop.

"If they had had time to learn their new machine a little better, I would never have lived to reach them in time." He glanced down at Ciaran, standing uncertainly below. "Thanks to you, little man, they didn't have quite time enough."

He gestured to a staff. "Bring it, and I'll free your Mouse."

VII

A LONG TIME afterward Mouse and Ciaran and Bas the Immortal stood in the opal-tinted glow of the great room of the *crux ansata*. Outside the world was normal again, and safe. Bas had left full instructions about controlling and tending the centrifugal power plant.

The slaves were freed, going home across the Forbidden Plains—forbidden no longer. The Kalds were sleeping, mercifully; the big sleep from which they would never wake. The world was free, for humanity to make or mar on its own responsibility.

Mouse stood very close to Ciaran, her arm around his waist, his around her shoulders. Crimson rags mingling with yellow; fair shaggy hair mixing with black. Bas smiled at them.

"Now," he said, "I can be happy, until the planet itself is dead."

"You won't stay with us? Our gratitude, our love. . . ."

"Will be gone with the coming generations. No, little man. I built myself a world where I belong—the only world where I can ever belong. And I'll be happier in it than any of you, because it is my world—free of strife and ugliness and suffering. A beautiful world, for me and Marsali."

There was a radiance about him that Ciaran would put into a song some day, only half understanding.

"I don't envy you," whispered Bas, and smiled. Youth smiling in a spring dawn. "Think of us sometimes, and be jealous."

He turned and walked away, going lightly

over the wide stone floor and up the steps to the dais. Ciaran struck the harpstrings. He sent the music flooding up against the high vault, filling all the rocky space with a thrumming melody.

He sang. The tune he had sung for Mouse, on the ridge above the burning sea. A simple tune, about two people in love.

Bas lay down on the couch of furs and colored silks, soft on the shaft of the stone cross. He looked back at them once, smiling. One slim white arm raised in a brief salute and swept down across the black stone.

The milky light rose on the platform. It wavered, curdled, and thickened to a wall of warm pearl. Through it, for a moment, they could see him, his dark head pillowed on his forearm, his body sprawled in careless, angular grace. Then there was only the warm, soft shell of light.

Ciaran's harp whispered to silence. The tunnel into the pit was sealed. Mouse and Ciaran went out through the golden doors and closed them, very quietly—doors that would never be opened again as long as the world lived.

Then they came into each other's arms, and kissed.

Rough, tight arms on living flesh, lips that bruised and breaths that mingled, hot with life. Temper and passion, empty bellies, a harp that sang in crowded market squares, and no roof to fight under but the open sky.

And Ciaran didn't envy the dark-haired boy, dreaming on the stone cross.



THE AVENGER

By **STUART FLEMING**

Karson was creating a superman to fight the weird super-monsters who had invaded Earth. But he was forgetting one tiny thing—like calls to like.

Illustration by Ingels



PETER KARSON was dead. He had been dead for some time now, but the dark blood was still oozing from the crushed ruin of his face, trickling down into his sodden sleeve, and falling,

drop by slow drop, from his fingertips. His head was tilted over the back of the chair at a queer, unnatural angle, so that the light made deep pools of shadow where his eyes had been.

There was no sound in the room except for the small splashing the blood made as it dropped into the sticky pool on the floor. The great banks of machinery around the walls were silent. I knew that they would never come to life again.

I rose and walked over to the window. Outside, the stars were as before: tiny, myriad points of light, infinitely far away. They had not changed, and yet they were suddenly no longer friendly. They were cold and alien. It was I who had changed: something inside me was dead, like the machinery, and like Peter.

It was a kind of indefinable emptiness. I do not think it was what Peter called an emotion; and yet it had nothing to do with logic, either. It was just an emptiness—a void that could not be filled by eating or drinking.

It was not a longing. I had no desire that things should be otherwise than they were. I did not even wish that Peter were not dead, for reason had told me that he had to die. That was the end of it.

But the void was still there, unexplainable and impossible to ignore. For the first time in all my life I had found a problem that I could not solve. Strange, disturbing sensations stirred and whispered within me, nagging, gnawing. And suddenly—something moved on the skin of my cheek. I raised a hand to it, slowly.

A tear was trickling down my cheek.

YOUNG Peter Karson put the last black-print down and sighed with satisfaction. His dream was perfect; the *Citadel* was complete, every minutest detail provided for—on paper. In two weeks they would be laying the core, and then the metal giant itself would begin to grow, glittering, pulsing with each increment of power, until at last it lay finished, a living thing.

Then there would remain only the task of blasting the great, shining ship out into the carefully-calculated orbit that would be its home. In his mind's eye he could see it, slowly wheeling, like a second satellite, about the Earth; endlessly gathering knowledge into its insatiable mechanisms. He could see, too, the level on level of laboratories and storerooms that filled its interlocking segments; the meteor defectors, the air renewal system, the mighty

engines at the stern—all the children of his brain.

Out there, away from the muffling, distorting, damnable blanket of atmosphere, away from Earth's inexorable gravitational pull, would be a laboratory such as man had never seen. The ship would be filled with the sounds of busy men and women, wresting secrets from the reluctant ether. A new chemistry, a new physics; perhaps even a new biochemistry.

A discordant note suddenly entered his fantasy. He looked up, conscious of the walls of his office again, but could see nothing unusual. Still, that thin, dark whisper of dread was at the back of his mind. Slowly, as if reluctantly compelled, he turned around to face the window at his back.

There, outside the window, fifty stories up, a face was staring impassively in at him. That was the first impression he got; just a face, staring. Then he saw, with a queer, icy chill, that the face was blood-red and subtly inhuman. It tapered off into a formless, shriveled body.

For a moment or an eternity it hung there, unsupported, the bulging eyes staring at him. Then it grew misty at the edges. It dissolved slowly away and was gone.

"Lord!" he said.

He stared after it, stunned into immobility. Down in the street somewhere, a portable video was shrilling a popular song; after a moment he heard the faint swish of a tube car going past. Everything was normal. Nothing, on examination, seemed to have changed. But the world had grown suddenly unreal.

One part of his brain had been shocked into its shell. It was hiding from the thing that had hurt it, and it refused to respond. But the other part was going calmly, lucidly on, quite without his volition. It considered the possibility that he had gone temporarily insane, and decided that this was probable.

Hardly knowing what he did, he found a cigarette and lit it. His hands were shaking. He stared at them dully, and then he reached over to the newsbox on his desk, and switched it on.

There were flaring red headlines.

Relief washed over him, leaving him breathless. He was horrified, of course,

but only abstractedly. For the moment he could only be glad that what he had seen was terrible reality rather than even more terrible illusion.

INVADERS APPEAR IN BOSTON. 200 DEAD

Then lines of type, and farther down:
50 CHILDREN DISAPPEAR FROM
PARIS MATERNITY CENTER

He pressed the stud. The roll was full of them.

MOON SHIP DESTROYED IN TRANSIT NO COMMUNICATION FROM ANTARCTICA IN 6 HOURS STRANGE FORCE DEFLECTS PLANES FROM SAHARA AREA WORLD POLICE MOBILIZING

The item below the last one said:

Pacifica, June 7—The World Police are mobilizing, for the first time in fifty years. The order was made public early this morning by R. Stein, Secretary of the Council, who said in part:

"The reason for this . . . order must be apparent to all civilized peoples. For the Invaders have spared no part of this planet in their depredations: they have laid HongKong waste; they have terrorized London; they have destroyed the lives of citizens in every member state and in every inhabited area. There can be few within reach of printed reports or my words who have not seen the Invaders, or whose friends have not seen them.

"The peoples of the world, then, know what they are, and know that we face the most momentous struggle in our history. We face an enemy *superior to ourselves in every way.*

"Since the Invaders first appeared in Wood River, Oregon, 24 hours ago, they have not once acknowledged our attempts to communicate, or in any way taken notice of our existence as reasoning beings. They have treated us precisely as we, in less enlightened days, might have treated a newly-discovered race of lower animals. They have not attacked our centers of government, nor immobilized our communications, nor laid siege to our defenses. But in instance after instance, they have done as they would with us. They have examined us, dissected us, driven us mad,

killed us with no discernable provocation; and this is more intolerable than any normal invasion.

"I have no fear that the people of Earth will fail to meet this challenge, for there is no alternative. Not only our individual lives are threatened, but our existence as a race. We must, and will, destroy the Invaders!"

Peter sank back in his chair, the full shock of it striking him for the first time.

"Will we?" he asked himself softly.

IT WAS only two stories down the moving ramp to Lorelei Cooper's laboratory. Peter took it in fifteen seconds, running, and stumbled to a halt in front of the door marked "Radiation." She had set her door mechanism to "Etaoin Shrdlu," principally because he hated double-talk. He mouthed the syllables, had to repeat them because he put an accent in the wrong place, and squeezed through the door as soon as it opened far enough to admit him.

Lorelei, beautiful in spite of dark-circled eyes and a smear of grease on her chin, looked up from a huge ledger at the end of the room. One blonde eyebrow arched in the quizzical expression he knew so well.

"What makes, Peter my love?" she asked, and bent back to the ledger. Then she did a double-take, looked at his face intently, and said, "Darling, what's wrong?"

He said, "Have you seen the news recently?"

She frowned. "Why, no—Harry and I have been working for thirty-six hours straight. Haven't seen anybody, haven't heard anything. Why?"

"You wouldn't believe me. Where's your newsbox?"

She came around the desk and put her hands on his shoulders. "Pete, you know I haven't one—it bores me or upsets me, depending on whether there's trouble or not. What—"

"I'm sorry, I forgot," he said. "But you have a scanner?"

"Yes, of course. But really, Pete—"

"You'll understand in a minute. Turn it on, Lorelei."

She gazed at him levelly for a moment, kissed him impulsively, and then walked

over to the video panel on the wall and swept a mountain of papers away from in front of it. She turned the selector dial to "News" and pressed the stud.

A faint wash of color appeared on the panel, strengthened slowly, and suddenly leapt into full brilliance.

Lorelei caught her breath.

It was a street scene in the Science City of Manhattan, flooded by the warm spring sunshine. Down on the lowest level, visible past the transport and passenger tubes, the parks and moving ways should have been dotted with colorful, holiday crowds. The people were there, yes but they were flowing away in a swiftly-widening circle. They disappeared into buildings, and the ways snatched them up, and in a heartbeat they were gone.

There were left only two blood-red, malignant monstrosities somehow defiling the air they floated in; and below them, a pitiful huddle of flesh no longer recognizable as human beings. They were not dead, those men and women, but they wanted to be. Their bodies had been impossibly joined, fused together into a single obscene, floundering mass of helpless protoplasm. The thin moaning that went up from them was more horrible than any cry of agony.

"The Invaders are here, citizens," the commentator was saying in a strangled voice. "Stay off the streets. Hide yourselves. Stay off the streets. . . ." His voice droned on, but neither of them heard it.

LORELEI buried her head on his chest, clutching at him desperately. "Peter!" she said faintly. "Why do they broadcast such things?"

"They have to," he told her grimly. "There will be panics and suicides, and they know it; but they have to do it. This isn't like a war, where the noncombatants' morale has to be kept up. There aren't going to be an noncombatants, this time. Everybody in the world has to know about them, so that he can fight them—and then it may not be enough."

The viewpoint of the teleo sender changed as the two red beings soared away from their victims and angled slowly up the street. Peter reached out to switch

off the scanner, and froze. The girl felt his muscles tense abruptly, looked back at the scene. The Invaders were floating up the sloping side of a tall, pure white structure that dominated the rest.

"That's the Atlas building," she said unbelievably. "Us!"

"Yes."

Silently, they counted stories as the two beings rose. Forty-five . . . forty-six . . . forty-seven . . . forty-eight. Inevitably, they halted. Then they faded slowly. It was impossible to say whether they had gone through the solid wall, or simply melted away.

The man and woman clung together, waiting.

There was a thick, oppressive silence, full of small rustlings and other faint sounds that were no longer normal. Then, very near, a man screamed in a high, unhuman voice. The screamed dwindled into a throaty gurgle and died, leaving silence again.

Peter's lips were cold with sweat. Tiny nerves in his face and arms were jumping convulsively. His stomach crawled. He thrust the girl away from him and started toward the inner room.

"Wait here," he mouthed.

She was after him, clinging to his arms. "No, Peter! Don't go in there! *Peter!*" But he pushed her away again, woodenly, and stalked forward.

There was a space in the middle of the room where machinery had been cleared away to make room for an incompleated setup. Peter walked down the narrow aisle, past bakelite-sheathed mechanisms and rows of animal cages, and paused just short of it.

The two red beings were there, formless bodies hazy in midair, the distorted, hairless skulls in profile, staring at something outside his range of vision

PPETER forced himself forward another step. Little Harry Kanin, Lorelei's assistant, was crumpled in a corner, half supported by the broad base of an X-ray chamber. His face was flaccid and bloated. His glazed eyes, impassive yet somehow pleading, stared at nothingness straight ahead of him.

The Invaders ignored Peter, staring expressionlessly down at Kanin. In a mo-

ment Peter realized what they were doing to him. He stood, paralyzed with horror, and watched it happen.

The little man's body was sagging, ever so slowly, as if he were relaxing tiredly. His torso was telescoping, bit by bit; his spread legs grew wider and more shapeless, his cheeks caved in and his skull grew gradually flatter.

When it was over, the thing that had been Kanin was a limp, boneless puddle of flesh. Peter could not look at it.

There was a scream in his throat that would not come out. He was beyond fear, beyond agony. He turned to the still-hovering monsters and said in a terrible voice, "Why? Why?"

The nearest being turned slowly to regard him. Its lips did not move, but there was a tiny sound in Peter's brain, a thin, dry whispering.

The scream was welling up. He fought it down and listened.

"Wurnkomellilonasendiktolsangkanmiamiamimami. . ."

The face was staring directly into his, the bulging eyes hypnotic. The ears were small, no more than excrescences of skin. The narrow lips seemed sealed together; a thin, slimy ichor drooled from them. There were lines in the face, but they were lines of age, not emotion. Only the eyes were alive.

"... raswilopreatadrvonistuwurncchtausangkelglawwalinom. . ."

"I can't understand," he cried wildly. "What do you want?"

"... morofelcovisyanmamawurlectaunnous."

He heard a faint sound behind him, and whirled. It was the first time he had realized that Lorelei had followed him. She stood there, swaying, very pale, looking at the red Invaders. Her eyes swiveled slowly. . . .

"Opreniktoulestritifenrelngetnaktwiltocpre."

His voice was hoarse. "Don't look! Don't— Go back!" The horrible, mindless noise in his throat was almost beyond his power to repress. His insides writhed to thrust it out.

She didn't see him. Her eyes glazed, and she dropped limply to the floor.

The scream came out then. Before he knew, even, that he could hold it back no

longer, his mouth was wide open, his muscles tensed, his fingernails slicing his palms. It echoed with unbelievable volume in the room. It was a scream to split eardrums; a scream to wake the dead.

SOMEBODY said, "Doctor!"

He wanted to say, "Yes, get a doctor. Lorelei—" but his mouth only twitched feebly. He couldn't seem to get it to work properly.

He tried again. "Doctor."

"Yes?" A gentle, masculine voice.

He opened his eyes with an effort. There was a blurred face before him; in a moment it grew clearer. The strong, clean-shaven chin contrasted oddly with the haggard circles under the eyes. There was a clean, starched odor.

"Where am I?" he said. He tried to turn his head, but a firm hand pressed him back into the sheets.

"You're in a hospital. Just lie quietly, please."

He tried to get up again. "Where's Lorelei?"

"She's well, and you'll see her soon. Now lie quietly. You've been a very sick man."

Peter sank back in the bed. The room was coming into focus. He looked around him slowly. He felt very weak, but perfectly lucid.

"Yes . . ." he said. "How long have I been here, Doctor?"

The man hesitated, looked at him intently. "Three months," he said. He turned and gave low-voiced instructions to a nurse, and then went away.

Peter's head began spinning just a little. Glass clinked from a metal stand near his head; the nurse bent over him with a glass half full of milky fluid. It tasted awful, but she made him drink it all.

In a moment he began to relax, and the room got fuzzy again. Just before he drifted off, he said sleepily, "You can't—fool me. It's been *more*—than three—months."

He was right. All the nurses, and even Dr. Arnold, were evasive, but he kept asking them why he couldn't see Lorelei, and finally he wormed it out of them. It had been nine and a half months, not three, and he'd been in a coma all that time.

Lorelei, it seemed, had recovered much sooner.

"She was only suffering from ordinary shock," Arnold explained. "Seeing that assistant of hers—it was enough to knock anybody out, especially a woman. But you stood actual mental contact with *them* for approximately five minutes. Yes, we know—you talked a lot. It's a miracle you're alive, and rational."

"But where is she?" Peter complained. "You still haven't explained why I haven't been able to see her."

Arnold frowned. "All right," he said. "I guess you're strong enough to take it. She's underground, with the rest of the women and children, and a good two-thirds of the male population. That's where you'll go, as soon as you're well enough to be moved. We started digging in six months ago."

"But why?" Peter whispered.

Arnold's strong jaw knotted. "We're hiding," he said. "Everything else has failed."

Peter couldn't think of anything to say. Dr. Arnold's voice went on after a moment, musingly. "We're burrowing into the earth, like worms. It didn't take us long to find out we couldn't kill them. They didn't even take any notice of our attempts to do so, except once. That was when a squadron of the Police caught about fifty of them together at one time, and attacked with flame guns and a new secret weapon. It didn't hurt them, but it annoyed them. It was the first time they'd been annoyed, I think. They blew up half a state, and it's still smoldering."

"And since then?" Peter asked huskily.

"Since then, we've been burrowing. All the big cities. . . . It would be an impossible task if we tried to include all the thinly-populated areas, of course, but it doesn't matter. By the time we excavate enough to take care of a quarter of the earth's population, the other three-quarters will be dead, or worse."

"I wonder," Peter said shakily, "if I am strong enough to take it."

Arnold laughed harshly. "You are. You've got to be. You're part of our last hope, you see."

"Our last hope?"

"Yes. You're a scientist."

"I see," said Peter. And for the first

time, he thought of the *Citadel*. No plan leaped full-born into his mind, but, *maybe*, he thought, *there's a chance*. . . .

IT WASN'T very big, the thing that had been his shining dream. It lay there in its rough cradle, a globe of raw dura-steel not more than five hundred meters in diameter, where the *Citadel* was to have been a thousand. It wouldn't house a hundred scientists, eagerly delving into the hinterland of research. The huge compartments weren't filled with the latest equipment for chemical and physical experiment; instead, there was compressed oxygen there, and concentrated food, enough to last a lifetime.

It was a new world, all by itself; or else it was a tomb. And there was one other change, one that you couldn't see from the outside. The solid meters of lead in its outer skin, the shielding to keep out cosmic rays, were gone.

A man had just finished engraving the final stroke on its nameplate, to the left of the airlock—*The Avenger*. He stepped away now, and joined the group a little distance away, silently waiting.

Lorelei said, "You can't do it. I won't let you! Peter—"

"Darling," he began wearily.

"Don't throw your life away! Give us time—there must be another way."

"There's no other way," Peter said. He gripped her arms tightly, as if he could compel her to understand by the sheer pressure of his fingers. "Darling, listen to me. We've tried everything. We've gone underground, but that's only delaying the end. *They* still come down here, only not as many. The mortality rate is up, the suicide rate is up, the birth rate is down, in spite of anything we can do. You've seen the figures: we're riding a curve that ends in extinction fifty years from now.

"They'll live, and we'll die, because they're a superior race. We're a million years too far back even to understand what they are or where they came from. Besides them, we're apes. There's only one answer."

She was crying now, silently, with great racking sobs that shook her slender body. But he went remorselessly on.

"Out there, in space, the cosmos change

unshielded life. They make tentacles out of arms; or scales out of hair; or twelve toes, or a dozen ears—or a better brain. Out of those millions of possible mutations, there's one that will save the human race. We can't fight *them*, but a superman could. That's our only chance. Lorelei—darling—don't you see that?"

She choked, "But why can't you take me along?"

He stared unseeingly past her wet, upturned face. "You know why," he said bitterly. "Those rays are strong. They don't only work on embryos; they change adult life forms, too. I have one chance in seven of staying alive. You'd have one chance in a million of staying beautiful. I couldn't stand that. I'd kill myself, and then humanity would die, too. You'd be their murderer."

Her sobs gradually died away. She straightened slowly until he no longer had to support her, but all the vitality and resilience was gone out of her body. "All right," she said in a lifeless voice. "You'll come back, Peter."

He turned away suddenly, not trusting himself to kiss her goodbye. A line from an old film kept echoing through his head. "*They'll come back—but not as boys!*"

We'll come back, but not as men.

We'll come back, but not as elephants.

We'll come back, but not as octopi.

HE WAS trembling violently. He ran the last few steps, stumbled into the airlock, and pressed the stud that would seal the door behind him. *We'll come back. . . .* He heard the massive disk sink home, closing him off. Then he sank down on the floor of the airlock and put his head in shaking hands.

After a while he roused himself, closed the inner door of the lock behind him, and walked down the long corridor into the control chamber. The shining banks of keys were there, waiting for his touch; he slumped down before them and listlessly closed the contact of the visiplat.

He swung its field slowly, scanning for the last time the bare walls of the underground chamber, making sure that all the spectators had retired out of the way of the blast. Then his clawed fingers poised over the keys, hovered a moment, and thrust down.

Acceleration pressed him deep into his chair. In the visiplat, the heavy doors that closed the tunnel above him flashed back, one by one. The energy-charged screen flickered off to let him pass, and closed smoothly behind him. The last doors, cleverly camouflaged, slipped back into place and then dwindled in the distance. It was done.

He flashed on out, past the moon, past Mars, over the asteroid belt. The days merged into weeks, then months, and finally, far out, *The Avenger* curved into an orbit and held it. The great motors died, and the silence pressed in about him.

Already he could feel the invisible rays burning resistlessly through his flesh as if it were water, shifting the cells of his body, working its slow, monstrous alchemy upon him. Peter waited until the changes were unmistakably evident in his skin and hair, and then he smashed all the mirrors in the ship.

The embryos were pulsing with unnatural life, even in the suspended animation of their crystal cells. One by one he allowed them to mature, and after weeks or years destroyed the monstrosities that came from the incubators. Time went by, meaninglessly. He ate when he was hungry, slept when his driving purpose let him, and worked unceasingly, searching for the million-to-one chance.

He stared sometimes through changed eyes at the tiny blue star that was Earth, wondering if the race he had left behind still burrowed in its worm-tunnels, digging deeper and deeper away from the sunlight. But after a time he ceased even to wonder.

And one changeling-child he did not destroy. He fed knowledge to its eager brain, and watched it through the swift years, with a dawning hope. . . .

PETER closed the diary. "The rest you know, Robert," he said.

"Yes," I told him; "I was that child. I am the millionth mutation you were searching for."

His eyes glowed suddenly in their misshapen sockets. "You are. Your brain is as superior to mine as mine is to an anthropoid's. You solve instinctively problems that would take our mechanical computers hours of work. You are a superman."

"I am without your imperfections," I said, flexing my arms.

He rose and strode nervously over to the window. I watched him as he stood there, outlined against the blazing galaxies. He had changed but little in the years that I had known him. His lank gray hair straggled over his sunken eyes; his cheeks were bled with excrescences of flesh; one corner of his mouth was drawn up in a perpetual grin. He had a tiny sixth finger on his left hand.

He turned again, and I saw the old scar on his cheek where I had once accidentally drawn one of my talons across his face.

"And now," he said softly, "we will go home. I've waited so long—keeping the control chamber and the engine room locked away from you, not telling you, even, about Earth until now—because I had to be sure. But now, the waiting is over.

"They're still there, I'm sure of it—the people, and the Invaders. You can kill the Invaders, Robert."

He looked at me, a little oddly, almost as if he had some instinctive knowledge of what was to come. But he went on swiftly, "On Earth we had a saying: 'Fight fire with fire.' That is the way it will be with you. You are completely, coldly logical, just as *they* are. You can understand them, and so you can conquer them."

I said, "That is the reason why we will not go back to Earth."

He stared at me, his jaw slack, his hands trembling. "What—what did you say?"

I repeated it patiently.

"But why?" he cried, sinking down into the chair before me. In an instant all the joy had gone out of him. I could not understand his suffering, but I could recognize it.

"You yourself have said it," I told him. "I am a being of logic, just as the beings who have invaded your planet are. I do not comprehend the things which you call hate, fear, joy and love, as they do not. If I went to Earth, I would use your people to further my knowledge, just as the invaders do. I would have no reason to kill the invaders. They are more nearly kin to me than your people."

PETER'S eyes were dull, his limbs slumped. For a moment I thought that the shock had deranged his mind.

His voice trembled when he said, "But if I ask you to kill them, and not my people?"

"To do so would be illogical."

He waved his hands helplessly. "Gratitude?" he muttered.

"No, you don't understand that, either."

Then he cried suddenly, "But I am your friend, Robert!"

"I do not understand 'friend,'" I said.

I did understand "gratitude," a little. It was a reciprocal arrangement: I did what Peter wished, so long as I did not actively want to do otherwise, because he had done things for me. Very well, then we must not go back. It was very simple, but I knew that he could not comprehend it.

I tried to explain it to him, however. But he only stared at me, with an expression on his face that I had never seen there before, and that, somehow, I did not like to see. It was disquieting, and so I hastened to the end that I knew was inevitable.

"Will you promise," I asked, "to abide by my decision?"

He kept on looking at me, his lips trembling in their fixed grin. "No!" he said. "Never! You'll change your mind some day—you must! We'll go back, then—I'll make you go back! Lorelei—" He collapsed, sobbing, his head sunk in his arms.

I knew that what he said was partly true. Some day, when I slept, as I would have to within months, he would go down to the control room, set the keys for the return, and lock the combinations of the doors behind him again. Sooner or later, in spite of me, *The Avenger* would go home. There was only one thing to do.

He was still slumped in his chair, his body shaken by his sobs. I rose silently, and stood for a moment looking down at him. It was best that it happen now; it was what he would have called "mercy."

I extended my arms, looking at the corded, black-furred length of them. I looked down at him once more, saying a silent farewell; and then I clasped his gray head, very quickly, between my hands.

The Monster Maker

By RAY BRADBURY

"Get Gunther," the official orders read. It was to laugh! For Click and Irish were marooned on the pirate's asteroid—their only weapons a single gun and a news-reel camera.

Illustration by Doolin



SUDDENLY, it was there. There wasn't time to blink or speak or get scared. Click Hathaway's camera was loaded and he stood there listening to it

rack-spin film between his fingers, and he knew he was getting a damned sweet picture of everything that was happening.

The picture of Marnagan hunched huge

over the control-console, wrenching levers, jamming studs with freckled fists. And out in the dark of the fore-part there was space and a star-sprinkling and this meteor coming like blazing fury.

Click Hathaway felt the ship move under him like a sensitive animal's skin. And then the meteor hit. It made a spiked fist and knocked the rear-jets flat, and the ship spun like a cosmic merry-go-round.

There was plenty of noise. Too damned much. Hathaway only knew he was picked up and hurled against a lever-bank, and that Marnagan wasn't long in following, swearing loud words. Click remembered hanging to his camera and gritting to keep holding it. What a sweet shot that had been of the meteor! A sweeter one still of Marnagan beating hell out of the controls and keeping his words to himself until just now.

It got quiet. It got so quiet you could almost hear the asteroids rushing up, cold blue and hard. You could hear your heart kicking a tom-tom between your sick stomach and your empty lungs.

Stars, asteroids revolved. Click grabbed Marnagan because he was the nearest thing, and held on. You came hunting for a space-raider and you ended up cradled in a slab-sized Irishman's arms, diving at a hunk of metal death. What a fade-out!

"Irish!" he heard himself say. "Is this IT?"

"Is this *what*?" yelled Marnagan inside his helmet.

"Is this where the Big Producer yells CUT!?"

Marnagan fumed. "I'll die when I'm damned good and ready. And when I'm ready I'll inform you and you can picture me profile for Cosmic Films!"

They both waited, thrust against the ship-side and held by a hand of gravity; listening to each other's breathing hard in the earphones.

The ship struck, once. Bouncing, it struck again. It turned end over and stopped. Hathaway felt himself grabbed; he and Marnagan rattled around—human dice in a croupier's cup. The shell of the ship burst, air and energy flung out.

Hathaway screamed the air out of his lungs, but his brain was thinking quick crazy, unimportant things. The best scenes in life never reach film, or an audience.

Like this one, dammit! Like *this* one! His brain spun, racketing like the instantaneous, flicking motions of his camera.

SILENCE came and engulfed all the noise, ate it up and swallowed it. Hathaway shook his head, instinctively grabbed at the camera locked to his mid-belt. There was nothing but stars, twisted wreckage, cold that pierced through his vac-suit, and silence. He wriggled out of the wreckage into that silence.

He didn't know what he was doing until he found the camera in his fingers as if it had grown there when he was born. He stood there, thinking "Well, I'll at least have a few good scenes on film. I'll—"

A hunk of metal teetered, fell with a crash. Marnagan elevated seven feet of bellowing manhood from the wreck.

"Hold it!" cracked Hathaway's high voice. Marnagan froze. The camera whirled. "Low angle shot; Interplanetary Patrolman emerges unscathed from asteroid crashup. Swell stuff. I'll get a raise for this!"

"From the toe of me boot!" snarled Marnagan brusquely. Oxen shoulders flexed inside his vac-suit. "I might've died in there, and you nursin' that film-contraption!"

Hathaway felt funny inside, suddenly. "I never thought of that. Marnagan die? I just took it for granted you'd come through. You always have. Funny, but you don't think about dying. You try not to." Hathaway stared at his gloved hand, but the gloving was so thick and heavy he couldn't tell if it was shaking. Muscles in his bony face went down, pale. "Where are we?"

"A million miles from nobody."

They stood in the middle of a pocked, time-eroded meteor plain that stretched off, dipping down into silent indigo and a rash of stars. Overhead, the sun poised; black and stars all around it, making it look sick.

"If we walk in opposite directions, Click Hathaway, we'd be shaking hands the other side of this rock in two hours." Marnagan shook his mop of dusty red hair. "And I promised the boys at Luna Base this time I'd capture that Gunther lad!"

His voice stopped and the silence spoke.

Hathaway felt his heart pumping slow, hot pumps of blood. "I checked my oxy-

gen, Irish. Sixty minutes of breathing left."

The silence punctuated that sentence, too. Upon the sharp meteoric rocks Hathaway saw the tangled insides of the radio, the food supply mashed and scattered. They were lucky to have escaped. Or *was* suffocation a better death . . .? *Sixty minutes.*

They stood and looked at one another.

"Damn that meteor!" said Marnagan, hotly.

Hathaway got hold of an idea; remembering something. He said it out: "Somebody tossed that meteor, Irish. I took a picture of it, looked it right in the eye when it rolled at us, and it was poker-hot. Space-meteors are never hot and glowing. If it's proof you want, I've got it here, on film."

Marnagan winced his freckled square of face. "It's not proof we need now, Click. Oxygen. And then *food*. And then some way back to Earth."

Hathaway went on saying his thoughts: "This is Gunther's work. He's here somewhere, probably laughing his guts out at the job he did us. Oh, God, this would make great news-release stuff if we ever get back to Earth. I.P.'s Irish Marnagan, temporarily indisposed by a pirate whose dirty face has never been seen, Gunther by name, finally wins through to a triumphant finish. Photographed on the spot, in color, by yours truly, Click Hathaway. Cosmic Films, please notice."

THEY started walking, fast, over the pocked, rubble plain toward a bony ridge of metal. They kept their eyes wide and awake. There wasn't much to see, but it was better than standing still, waiting.

Marnagan said, "We're working on margin, and we got nothin' to sweat with except your suspicions about this not being an accident. We got fifty minutes to prove you're right. After that—right or wrong—you'll be Cosmic Films prettiest unmovin', unbreathin' genius. But talk all you like, Click. It's times like this when we all need words, any words, on our tongues. You got your camera and your scoop. Talk about it. As for me—" he twisted his glossy red face. "Keeping alive is me hobby. And this sort of two-bit death I did not order."

Click nodded. "Gunther knows how

you'd hate dying this way, Irish. It's irony clean through. That's probably why he planned the meteor and the crash this way."

Marnagan said nothing, but his thick lips went down at the corners, far down, and the green eyes blazed.

They stopped, together.

"Oops!" Click said.

"Hey!" Marnagan blinked. "Did you feel that?"

Hathaway's body felt feathery, light as a whisper, boneless and limbless, suddenly. "Irish! 'We lost weight, coming over that ridge!'"

They ran back. "Let's try it again."

They tried it. They scowled at each other. The same thing happened. "Gravity should not act this way, Click."

"Are you telling me? It's man-made. Better than that—it's Gunther! No wonder we fell so fast—we were dragged down by a super-gravity set-up! Gunther'd do anything to—did I say *anything*?"

Hathaway leaped backward in reaction. His eyes widened and his hand came up, jabbing. Over a hill-ridge swarmed a brew of unbelievable horrors. Progeny from Frankenstein's ARK. Immense crimson beasts with numerous legs and gnashing mandibles, brown-black creatures, some tubular and fat, others like thin white poisonous whips slashing along in the air. Fangs caught starlight white on them.

Hathaway yelled and ran, Marnagan at his heels, lumbering. Sweat broke cold on his body. The immense things rolled, slithered and squirmed after him. A blast of light. Marnagan, firing his proton-gun. Then, in Click's ears, the Irishman's incredulous bellow. The gun didn't hurt the creatures at all.

"Irish!" Hathaway flung himself over the ridge, slid down an incline toward the mouth a small cave. "This way, fella!"

Hathaway made it first, Marnagan following just behind him. "They're too big; they can't get us in here!" Click's voice gasped it out, as Marnagan squeezed his two-hundred-fifty pounds beside him. Instinctively, Hathaway added, "Asteroid monsters! My camera! What a scene!"

"Damn your damn camera!" yelled Marnagan. "They might come in!"

"Use your gun."

"They got impervious hides. No use,

Gahh! And that was a pretty chase, eh, Click?"

"Yeah. Sure. *You* enjoyed it, every moment of it."

"I did that." Irish grinned, showing white uneven teeth. "Now, what will we be doing with these uninvited guests at our door?"

"Let me think—"

"Lots of time, little man. Forty more minutes of air, to be exact."

THEY SAT, staring at the monsters for about a minute. Hathaway felt funny about something; didn't know what. Something about these monsters and Gunther and—

"Which one will you be having?" asked Irish, casually. "A red one or a blue one?"

Hathaway laughed nervously. "A pink one with yellow ruffles—Good God, now you've got *me* doing it. Joking in the face of death."

"Me father taught me; keep laughing and you'll have Irish luck."

That didn't please the photographer. "I'm an Anglo-Swede," he pointed out.

Marnagan shifted uneasily. "Here, now. You're doing nothing but sitting, looking like a little boy locked in a bedroom closet, so take me a profile shot of the beasts and myself."

Hathaway petted his camera reluctantly. "What in hell's the use? All this swell film shot. Nobody'll ever see it."

"Then," retorted Marnagan, "we'll develop it for our own benefit; while waitin' for the U. S. Cavalry to come riding over the hill to our rescue!"

Hathaway snorted. "U. S. Cavalry."

Marnagan raised his proton-gun dramatically. "Snap me this pose," he said. "I paid your salary to trot along, photographing, we hoped, my capture of Gunther, now the least you can do is record peace negotiations betwixt me and these pixies."

Marnagan wasn't fooling anybody. Hathaway knew the superficial palaver for nothing but a covering over the fast, furious thinking running around in that red-cropped skull. Hathaway played the palaver, too, but his mind was whirring faster than his camera as he spun a picture of Marnagan standing there with a useless gun pointed at the animals.

Montage. Marnagan sitting, chatting at the monsters. Marnagan smiling for the camera. Marnagan in profile. Marnagan looking grim, without much effort, for the camera. And then, a closeup of the thrashing death wall that holed them in. Click took them all, those shots, not saying anything. Nobody fooled nobody with this act. Death was near and they had sweaty faces, dry mouths and frozen guts.

When Click finished filming, Irish sat down to save oxygen, and used it up arguing about Gunther. Click came back at him:

"Gunther drew us down here, sure as Ceres! That gravity change we felt back on that ridge, Irish; that proves it. Gunther's short on men. So, what's he do; he builds an asteroid-base, and drags ships down. Space war isn't perfect yet, guns don't prime true in space, trajectory is lousy over long distances. So what's the best weapon, which dispenses with losing valuable, rare ships and a small bunch of men? Super-gravity and a couple of well-tossed meteors. Saves all around. It's a good front, this damned iron pebble. From it, Gunther strikes unseen; ships simply crash, that's all. A subtle hand, with all aces."

Marnagan rumbled. "Where is the dirty son, then!"

"He didn't have to appear, Irish. He sent—them." Hathaway nodded at the beasts. "People crashing here die from air-lack, no food, or from wounds caused at the crackup. If they survive all that—the animals tend to them. It all looks like Nature was responsible. See how subtle his attack is? Looks like accidental death instead of murder, if the Patrol happens to land and finds us. No reason for undue investigation, then."

"I don't see no Base around."

CLICK shrugged. "Still doubt it? Okay. Look." He tapped his camera and a spool popped out onto his gloved palm. Holding it up, he stripped it out to its full twenty inch length, held it to the light while it developed, smiling. It was one of his best inventions. Self developing film. The first light struck film-surface, destroyed one chemical, leaving imprints; the second exposure simply hardened, secured the impressions. Quick stuff.

Inserting the film-tongue into a micro-viewer in the camera's base, Click handed the whole thing over. "Look."

Marnagan put the viewer up against the helmet glass, squinted. "Ah, Click. Now, now. This is one lousy film you invented."

"Huh?"

"It's a strange process'll develop my picture and ignore the asteroid monsters complete."

"What!"

Hathaway grabbed the camera, gasped, squinted, and gasped again: Pictures in montage; Marnagan sitting down, chatting conversationally with *nothing*; Marnagan shooting his gun at *nothing*; Marnagan pretending to be happy in front of *nothing*.

Then, closeup—of—NOTHING!

The monsters had failed to image the film. Marnagan was there, his hair like a red banner, his freckled face with the blue eyes bright in it. Maybe—

Hathaway said it, loud: "Irish! Irish! I think I see a way out of this mess! Here—"

He elucidated it over and over again to the Patrolman. About the film, the beasts, and how the film couldn't be wrong. If the film said the monsters weren't there, they weren't there.

"Yeah," said Marnagan. "But step outside this cave—"

"If my theory is correct I'll do it, unafraid," said Click.

Marnagan scowled. "You sure them beasts don't radiate ultra-violet or infrared or something that won't come out on film?"

"Nuts! Any color *we* see, the camera sees. We've been fooled."

"Hey, where *you* going?" Marnagan blocked Hathaway as the smaller man tried pushing past him.

"Get out of the way," said Hathaway.

Marnagan put his big fists on his hips. "If anyone is going anywhere, it'll be me does the going."

"I can't let you do that, Irish."

"Why not?"

"You'd be going on my say-so."

"Ain't your say-so good enough for me?"

"Yes. Sure. Of course. I guess—"

"If you say them animals ain't there, that's all I need. Now, stand aside, you

film developing flea, and let an Irishman settle their bones." He took an unnecessary hitch in trousers that didn't exist except under an inch of porous metal plate. "Your express purpose on this voyage, Hathaway, is taking films to be used by the Patrol later for teaching Junior Patrolmen how to act in tough spots. First hand education. Poke another spool of film in that contraption and give me profile a scan. This is lesson number seven: Daniel Walks Into The Lion's Den."

"Irish, I—"

"Shut up and load up."

Hathaway nervously loaded the film-slot, raised it.

"Ready, Click?"

"I—I guess so," said Hathaway. "And remember, think it hard, Irish. Think it hard. There aren't any animals—"

"Keep me in focus, lad."

"All the way, Irish."

"What do they say . . . ? Oh, yeah. Action. Lights. Camera!"

Marnagan held his gun out in front of him and still smiling took one, two, three, four steps out into the outside world. The monsters were waiting for him at the fifth step. Marnagan kept walking.

Right out into the middle of them, . . .

THAT was the sweetest shot Hathaway ever took. Marnagan and the monsters!

Only now it was only Marnagan.

No more monsters.

Marnagan smiled a smile broader than his shoulders. "Hey, Click, look at me! I'm in one piece. Why, hell, the damned things turned tail and ran away!"

"Ran, hell!" cried Hathaway, rushing out, his face flushed and animated. "They just plain vanished. They were only imaginative figments!"

"And to think we let them hole us in that way, Click Hathaway, you coward!"

"Smile when you say that, Irish."

"Sure, and ain't I always smilin'? Ah, Click boy, are them tears in your sweet grey eyes?"

"Damn," swore the photographer, embarrassedly. "Why don't they put window-wipers in these helmets?"

"I'll take it up with the Board, lad."

"Forget it. I was so blamed glad to see

your homely carcass in one hunk, I couldn't help— Look, now, about Gunther. Those animals are part of his set-up. Explorers who land here inadvertently, are chased back into their ships, forced to take off, Tourists and the like. Nothing suspicious about animals. And if the tourists don't leave, the animals kill them."

"Shaw, now. Those animals can't kill."

"Think not, Mr. Marnagan? As long as we believed in them they could have frightened us to death, forced us, maybe, to commit suicide. If that isn't being dangerous—"

The Irishman whistled.

"But, we've got to *move*, Irish. We've got twenty minutes of oxygen. In that time we've got to trace those monsters to their source, Gunther's Base, fight our way in, and get fresh oxy-cannisters." Click attached his camera to his mid-belt. "Gunther probably thinks we're dead by now. Everyone else's been fooled by his play-mates; they never had a chance to disbelieve them."

"If it hadn't been for you taking them pictures, Click—"

"Coupled with your damned stubborn attitude about the accident—" Click stopped and felt his insides turning to water. He shook his head and felt a film slip down over his eyes. He spread his legs out to steady himself, and swayed. "I—I don't think my oxygen is as full as yours. This excitement had me double-breathing and I feel sick."

Marnagan's homely face grimaced in sympathy. "Hold tight, Click. The guy that invented these fish-bowls didn't provide for a sick stomach."

"Hold tight, hell, let's move. We've got to find where those animals came from! And the only way to do that is to get the animals to come back!"

"Come back? How?"

"They're waiting, just outside the aura of our thoughts, and if we believe in them again, they'll return."

Marnagan didn't like it. "Won't—won't they kill us—if they come—if we believe in 'em?"

Hathaway shook a head that was tons heavy and weary. "Not if we believe in them to a *certain point*. Psychologically they can both be seen and felt. We only

want to *see* them coming at us again."

"Do we, now?"

"With twenty minutes left, maybe less—"

"All right, Click, let's bring 'em back. How do we do it?"

Hathaway fought against the mist in his eyes. "Just think—I will see the monsters again. I will see them again and I will not feel them. Think it over and over."

Marnagan's hulk stirred uneasily. "And—what if I forget to remember all that? What if I get excited. . . ?"

Hathaway didn't answer. But his eyes told the story by just looking at Irish.

Marnagan cursed. "All right, lad. Let's have at it!"

The monsters returned.

A SOUNDLESS deluge of them, pouring over the rubbed horizon, swarming in malevolent anticipation about the two men.

"This way, Irish. They come from this way! There's a focal point, a sending station for these telepathic brutes. Come on!"

Hathaway slugged into the pressing tide of color, mouths, contorted faces, silvery fat bodies misting as he plowed through them.

Marnagan was making good progress ahead of Hathaway. But he stopped and raised his gun and made quick moves with it. "Click! This one here! It's real!" He fell back and something struck him down. His immense frame slammed against rock, noiselessly.

Hathaway darted forward, flung his body over Marnagan's, covered the helmet glass with his hands, shouting:

"Marnagan! Get a grip, dammit! It's not real—don't let it force into your mind! It's not real, I tell you!"

"Click—" Marnagan's face was a bitter, tortured movement behind glass. "Click—" He was fighting hard. "I—I—sure now. Sure—" He smiled. "It—it's only a shanty fake!"

"Keep saying it, Irish. Keep it up."

Marnagan's thick lips opened. "It's only a fake," he said. "And then, irritated, "Get the hell off me, Hathaway. Let me up to my feet!"

Hathaway got up, shakily. The air in his helmet smelled stale, and little bubbles

danced in his eyes. "Irish, you forget the monsters. Let me handle them, I know how. They might fool you again, you might forget."

Marnagan showed his teeth. "Gah! Let a flea have all the fun? And besides, Click, I like to look at them. They're pretty."

The outpour of animals came from a low lying mound a mile farther on. Evidently the telepathic source lay there. They approached it warily.

"We'll be taking our chances on guard," hissed Irish. "I'll go ahead, draw their attention, maybe get captured. Then, you show up with *your* gun. . . ."

"I haven't got one."

"We'll chance it, then. You stick here until I see what's ahead. They probably got scanners out. Let them see me—"

And before Hathaway could object, Marnagan walked off. He walked about five hundred yards, bent down, applied his fingers to something, heaved up, and there was a door opening in the rock.

His voice came back across the distance, into Click's earphones. "A door, an air-lock, Click. A tunnel leading down inside!"

Then, Marnagan dropped into the tunnel, disappearing. Click heard the thud of his feet hitting the metal flooring.

Click sucked in his breath, hard and fast.

"All right, put 'em up!" a new harsh voice cried over a different radio. One of Gunther's guards.

Three shots sizzled out, and Marnagan bellowed.

The strange harsh voice said, "That's better. Don't try and pick that gun up now. Oh, so it's you. I thought Gunther had finished you off. How'd you get past the animals?"

Click started running. He switched off his *sending* audio, kept his *receiving* on. Marnagan, weaponless. One guard. Click gasped. Things were getting dark. Had to have air. Air. Air. He ran and kept running and listening to Marnagan's lying voice:

"I tied them pink elephants of Gunther's in neat alphabetical bundles and stacked them up to dry, ya louse!" Marnagan said. "But, damn you, they killed my partner before he had a chance!"

The guard laughed.

THE air-lock door was still wide open when Click reached it, his head swimming darkly, his lungs crammed with pain-fire and hell-rockets. He let himself down in, quiet and soft. He didn't have a weapon. He didn't have a weapon. Oh, damn, damn!

A tunnel curved, ending in light, and two men silhouetted in that yellow glare. Marnagan, backed against a wall, his helmet cracked, air hissing slowly out of it, his face turning blue. And the guard, a proton gun extended stiffly before him, also in a vac-suit. The guard had his profile toward Hathaway, his lips twisting: "I think I'll let you stand right there and die," he said quietly. "That what Gunther wanted, anyway. A nice sordid death."

Hathaway took three strides, his hands out in front of him.

"Don't move!" he snapped. "I've got a weapon stronger than yours. One twitch and I'll blast you and the whole damned wall out from behind you! Freeze!"

The guard whirled. He widened his sharp eyes, and reluctantly, dropped his gun to the floor.

"Get his gun, Irish."

Marnagan made as if to move, crumpled clumsily forward.

Hathaway ran in, snatched up the gun, smirked at the guard. "Thanks for posing," he said. "That shot will go down in film history for candid acting."

"What!"

"Ah: ah! Keep your place. I've got a real gun now. Where's the door leading into the Base?"

The guard moved his head sullenly over his left shoulder.

Click was afraid he would show his weak dizziness. He needed air. "Okay. Drag Marnagan with you, open the door and we'll have air. Double time! Double!"

Ten minutes later, Marnagan and Hathaway, fresh tanks of oxygen on their backs, Marnagan in a fresh bulger and helmet, trussed the guard, hid him in a huge trash receptacle. "Where he belongs," observed Irish tersely.

They found themselves in a complete inner world; an asteroid nothing more than a honey-comb fortress sliding through the void unchallenged. Perfect front for a raider who had little equipment and was short-handed of men. Gunther simply

waited for specific cargo ships to rocket by, pulled them or knocked them down and swarmed over them for cargo. The animals served simply to insure against suspicion and the swarms of tourists that filled the void these days. Small fry weren't wanted. They were scared off.

The telepathic sending station for the animals was a great bank of intricate, glittering machine, through which strips of colored film with images slid into slots and machine mouths that translated them into thought-emanations. A damned neat piece of genius.

"So here we are, still not much better off than we were," growled Irish. "We haven't a ship or a space-radio, and more guards'll turn up any moment. You think we could refocus this doohingey, project the monsters inside the asteroid to fool the pirates themselves?"

"What good would that do?" Hathaway gnawed his lip. "They wouldn't fool the engineers who created them, you nut."

Marnagan exhaled disgustedly. "Ah, if only the U. S. Cavalry would come riding over the hill—"

"**IRISH!**" Hathaway snapped that, his face lighting up. "Irish. The U. S. Cavalry it is!" His eyes darted over the machines. "Here. Help me. We'll stage everything on the most colossal raid of the century."

Marnagan winced. "You breathing oxygen or whiskey?"

"There's only one stipulation I make, Irish. I want a complete picture of Marnagan capturing Raider's Base. I want a picture of Gunther's face when you do it. Snap it, now, we've got rush work to do. How good an actor are you?"

"That's a silly question."

"You only have to do three things. Walk with your gun out in front of you, firing. That's number one. Number two is to clutch at your heart and fall down dead. Number three is to clutch at your side, fall down and twitch on the ground. Is that clear?"

"Clear as the Coal Sack Nebula. . . ."

An hour later Hathaway trudged down a passageway that led out into a sort of city street inside the asteroid. There were about six streets, lined with cube houses in yellow metal, ending near

Hathaway in a wide, green-lawned Plaza.

Hathaway, weaponless, idly carrying his camera in one hand, walked across the Plaza as if he owned it. He was heading for a building that was pretentious enough to be Gunther's quarters.

He got halfway there when he felt a gun in his back.

He didn't resist. They took him straight ahead to his destination and pushed him into a room where Gunther sat.

Hathaway looked at him. "So you're Gunther?" he said, calmly. The pirate was incredibly old, his bulging forehead stood out over sunken, questioningly dark eyes, and his scrawny body was lost in folds of metal-link cloth. He glanced up from a paper-file, surprised. Before he could speak, Hathaway said:

"Everything's over with, Mr. Gunther. The Patrol is in the city now and we're capturing your Base. Don't try to fight. We've a thousand men against your eighty-five."

Gunther sat there, blinking at Hathaway, not moving. His thin hands twitched in his lap. "You are bluffing," he said, finally, with a firm directness. "A ship hasn't landed here for an hour. Your ship was the last. Two people were on it. The last I saw of them they were being pursued to the death by the Beasts. One of you escaped, it seemed."

"Both. The other guy went after the Patrol."

"Impossible!"

"I can't respect your opinion, Mr. Gunther."

A shouting rose from the Plaza. About fifty of Gunther's men, lounging on carved benches during their time-off, stirred to their feet and started yelling. Gunther turned slowly to the huge window in one side of his office. He stared, hard.

The Patrol was coming!

Across the Plaza, marching quietly and decisively, came the Patrol. Five hundred Patrolmen in one long, incredible line, carrying paralysis guns with them in their tight hands.

Gunther babbled like a child, his voice a shrill dagger in the air. "Get out there, you men! Throw them back! We're outnumbered!"

Guns flared. But the Patrol came on. Gunther's men didn't run, Hathaway had

to credit them on that. They took it, standing.

Hathaway chuckled inside, deep. What a sweet, sweet shot this was. His camera whirred, clicked and whirred again. Nobody stopped him from filming it. Everything was too wild, hot and angry. Gunther was throwing a fit, still seated at his desk, unable to move because of his fragile, bony legs and their atrophied state.

Some of the Patrol were killed. Hathaway chuckled again as he saw three of the Patrolmen clutch at their hearts, crumple, lie on the ground and twitch. God, what photography!

Gunther raged, and swept a small pistol from his linked corselet. He fired wildly until Hathaway hit him over the head with a paper weight. Then Hathaway took a picture of Gunther slumped at his desk, the chaos taking place immediately outside his window.

The pirates broke and fled, those that were left. A mere handful. And out of the chaos came Marnagan's voice, "Here!"

ONE of the Patrolmen stopped firing, and ran toward Click and the Building. He got inside. "Did you see them run, Click boy? What an idea. How did we do?"

"Fine, Irish. Fine!"

"So here's Gunther, the spalpeen! Gunther, the little dried up pirate, eh?" Marnagan whacked Hathaway on the back. "I'll have to hand it to you, this is the best plan o' battle ever laid out. And proud I was to fight with such splendid men as these—" He gestured toward the Plaza.

Click laughed with him. "You should be proud. Five hundred Patrolmen with hair like red banners flying, with thick Irish brogues and broad shoulders and freckles and blue eyes and a body as tall as your stories!"

Marnagan roared. "I always said, I said—if ever there could be an army of Marnagans, we could lick the whole damn universe! Did you photograph it, Click?"

"I did," Hathaway tapped his camera happily.

"Ah, then, won't that be a scoop for you, boy? Money from the Patrol so they can use the film as instruction in Classes and

money from Cosmic Films for the news-reel headlines! And what a scene, and what acting! Five hundred duplicates of Steve Marnagan, broadcast telepathically into the minds of the pirates, walking across a Plaza, capturing the whole she-bang! How did you like my death-scenes?"

"You're a ham. And anyway—five hundred duplicates, nothing!" said Click. He ripped the film-spool from the camera, spread it in the air to develop, inserted it in the micro-viewer. "Have a look—"

Marnagan looked. "Ah, now. Ah, now," he said over and over. "There's the Plaza, and there's Gunther's men fighting and then they're turning and running. And what are they running from? One man! Me. Irish Marnagan! Walking all by myself across the lawn, paralyzing them. One against a hundred, and the cowards running from me!"

"Sure, Click, this is better than I thought. I forgot that the film wouldn't register telepathic emanations, them other Marnagans. It makes it look like I'm a mighty brave man, does it not? It does. Ah, look—look at me, Hathaway, I'm enjoying every minute of it, I am."

HATHAWAY swatted him on his back-side. "Look here, you egocentric son of Erin, there's more work to be done. More pirates to be captured. The Patrol is still marching around and someone might be suspicious if they looked too close and saw all that red hair."

"All right, Click, we'll clean up the rest of them now. We're a combination, we two, we are. I take it all back about your pictures, Click, if you hadn't thought of taking pictures of me and inserting it into those telepath machines we'd be dead ducks now. Well—here I go. . ."

Hathaway stopped him. "Hold it. Until I load my camera again."

Irish grinned. "Hurry it up. Here come three guards. They're unarmed. I think I'll handle them with me fists for a change. The gentle art of uppercuts. Are you ready, Hathaway?"

"Ready."

Marnagan lifted his big ham-fists.

The camera whirred. Hathaway chuckled, to himself.

What a sweet fade-out this was!

Saboteur of Space

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

Fresh power was coming to Earth, energy which would bring life to a dying planet. Only two men stood in its way, one a cowardly rat, the other a murderous martyr; both pawns in a cosmic game where death moved his chessmen of fate—and even the winner would lose.

Illustrated by Elias



blanket the almost lightless city with sound. A beam swayed through the throbbing darkness, caught the descending ship and held it, a small gleaming minnow slipping through the dark heavens. A faint glow rose from Pi Mesa, where the spaceport lay above the city, as a runway lighted up—draining the last reserves of the city's stored power, but draining them gladly now that, in those autumn days of the historic year 819, relief was in sight.

Ryd shrugged limply; the play was



meaningless to him. He turned to shuffle down the inviting ramp into the glowing interior of Burshis' dive.

The place was crowded with men and smoke. Perhaps half the former were asleep, on tables or on the floor; but for the few places like Burshis' which were still open under the power shortage, many would have frozen, these days, in the chilly nights at fourteen thousand feet. For Dynamopolis sprawled atop the world, now as in the old days when it had been built to be the power center of North America.

The rocket blasts crescendoed and died up on Pi Mesa as Ryd wedged himself with difficulty into the group along the bar. If anyone recognized him, they showed it only by looking fixedly at something else. Only Burshis Yuns kept his static smile and nodded with surprising friendliness at Ryd's pinched, old-young face.

Ryd was startled by the nod. Burshis finished serving another customer and maneuvered down the stained chrome-and-synthyl bar. Ryd was heartened.

"Say, Burshis," he started nervously, as the bulky man halted with his back to him. But Burshis turned, still smiling, shaking his head so that his jowls quivered.

"No loans," he said flatly. "But just one on the house, Ryd."

The drink almost spilled itself in Ryd's hand. Clutching it convulsively, he made his eyes narrow and said suspiciously, "What you setting 'em up for, Burshis? It's the first time since—"

Burshis' smile stayed put. He said affably, "Didn't you hear that ship that just came down on the Mesa? That was the ship from Mars—the escort they were sending with the power cylinder. The power's coming in again." He turned to greet a coin-tapping newcomer, added over his shoulder: "You know what that means, Ryd. Some life around here again. Jobs for all the bums in this town—even for you."

He left Ryd frowning, thinking fuzzily. A warning gulp seemed to clear his head. Jobs. So they thought they could put that over on him again, huh? Well, he'd show them. He was smart; he was a damn good helio man—no, that had been ten years ago. But now he was out of the habit of working, anyway. No job for Ryd Randl.

They gave him one once and then took it away. He drank still more deeply.

The man on Ryd's immediate right leaned toward him. He laid a hand on his arm, gripping it hard, and said quietly: "So you're Ryd Randl."

RYD HAD a bad moment before he saw that the face wasn't that of any plain-clothes man he knew. For that matter, it didn't belong to anybody he had ever known—an odd, big-boned face, strikingly ugly, with a beak-nose that was yet not too large for the hard jaw or too bleak for the thin mouth below it. An expensive transparent hat slanted over the face, and from its iridescent shadows gleamed eyes that were alert and almost frighteningly black. Ryd noted that the man wore a dark-gray cellulose of a sort rarely seen in joints like Burshis'.

"Suppose we step outside, Ryd. I'd like to talk to you."

"What's the idea?" demanded Ryd, his small store of natural courage floated to the top by alcohol.

The other seemed to realize that he was getting ahead of himself. He leaned back slightly, drew a deep breath, and said slowly and distinctly. "Would you care to make some money, my friend?"

"Huh? Why, yeh—I guess so—"

"Then come with me." The hand still on his arm was insistent. In his daze, Ryd let himself be drawn away from the bar into the sluggish crowd; then he suddenly remembered his unfinished drink, and made frantic gestures. Deliberately misunderstanding, the tall stranger fumbled briefly, tossed a coin on the counter-top, and hustled Ryd out, past the blue-and-gold-lit *meloderge* that was softly pouring out its endlessly changing music, through the swinging doors into the dark.

Outside, between lightless buildings, the still cold closed in on them. They kept walking—so fast that Ryd began to lose his breath, long-accustomed though his lungs were to the high, thin air.

"So you're Ryd Randl," repeated the stranger after a moment's silence. "I might have known you. But I'd almost given up finding you tonight."

Ryd tried feebly to wrench free, stumbled. "Look," he gasped. "If you're a cop, say so!"

The other laughed shortly. "No. I'm just a man about to offer you a chance. For a come-back, Ryd—a chance to live again. . . . My name—you can call me Mury."

Ryd was voiceless. Something seemed increasingly ominous about the tall, spare man at his side. He wished himself back in Burshis' with his first free drink in a month. The thought of it brought tears to his eyes.

"How long have you been out of a job, Ryd?"

"Nine . . . ten years. Say, what's it to you?"

"And why, Ryd?"

"Why . . . ? Look, mister, I was a helio operator." He hunched his narrow shoulders and spread his hands in an habitual gesture of defeat. "Damn good one, too—I was a foreman ten years ago. But I don't have the physique for Mars—I might just have made it *then*, but I thought the plant was going to open again and—"

And that was it. The almost airless Martian sky, with its burning actinic rays, is so favorable for the use of the helio-dynamic engine. And after the middle of the eighth century, robot labor gave Mars its full economic independence—and domination. For power is—power; and there is the Restriction Act to keep men on Earth even if more than two in ten could live healthily on the outer world.

"Ten years ago," Mury nodded as if satisfied. "That must have been the Power Company of North America—the main plant by Dynamopolis itself, that shut down in December, 809. They were the last to close down outside the military bases in the Kun Lun."

Ryd was pacing beside him now. He felt a queer upsurge of confidence in this strange man; for too long he had met no sympathy and all too few men who talked his language. He burst out: "They wouldn't take me, damn them! Said my record wasn't good enough for them. That is, I didn't have a drag with any of the Poligerents."

"I know all about your record," said Mury softly.

Ryd's suspicions came back abruptly, and he reverted to his old kicked-dog manner. "How do you know? And what's it to you?"

ALL AT ONCE, Mury came to a stop, and swung around to face him squarely, hard eyes compelling. They were on an overpass, not far from where the vast, almost wholly deserted offices of the Triplanet Freighting Company sprawled over a square mile of city. A half-smile twisted Mury's thin lips.

"Don't misunderstand me, Ryd—you mean nothing at all to me as an individual. But you're one of a vast mass of men for whom I am working—the billions caught in the net of a corrupt government and sold as an economic prey to the ruthless masters of Mars. This, after they've borne all the hardships of a year of embargo, have offered their hands willingly to the rebuilding of decadent Earth, only to be refused by the weak leaders who can neither defy the enemy nor capitulate frankly to him."

Ryd was dazed. His mind had never been constructed to cope with such ideas and the past few years had not improved its capabilities. "Are you talking about the power cylinder?" he demanded blurrily.

Mury cast a glance toward the Milky Way as if to descry the Martian cargo projectile somewhere up among its countless lights. He said simply, "Yes."

"I don't get it," mumbled Ryd, frowning. He found words that he had heard somewhere a day or so before, in some bar or flophouse: "The power cylinder is going to be the salvation of Earth. It's a shot in the arm—no, right in the heart of Earth industry, here in Dynamopolis. It will turn the wheels and light the cities and—"

"To hell with that!" snapped Mury, suddenly savage. His hands came up slightly, the fingers flexing; then dropped back to his sides. "Don't you know you're repeating damnable lies?"

Ryd could only stare, cringing and bewildered. Mury went on with a passion shocking after his smooth calm:

"The power shell is aid, yes—but with what a price! It's the thirty pieces of silver for which the venal fools who rule our nations have sold the whole planet to Mars. Because they lack the courage and vision to retool Earth's plants and factories for the inescapable conflict, they're selling us out—making Earth, the first home of man,

a colony of the Red Planet. Do you know what Earth is to the great Martian land-owners? *Do you?*" He paused out of breath; then finished venomously, "Earth is a great pool of labor ready to be tapped, cheaper than robots—cheap as *slaves!*"

"What about it?" gulped Ryd, drawing away from the fanatic. "What you want me to do about it?"

Mury took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. His face was once more bleakly impassive; only the mouth was an ugly line. "We're going to do something about it, you and I. Tonight. Now."

Ryd was nearly sober. And wholly terrified. He got out chokingly, "What's that mean?"

"The power shell—*isn't* coming in as planned."

"You can't do that."

"*We* can," said Mury with a heavy accent on the first word. "And there are fifty thousand credits in it for you, Ryd. Are you with us?"

Suspicion was chill reality now in Ryd's mind. And he knew one thing certainly—if he refused now to accompany Mury, he would be killed, by this man or another of his kind. For the secret power known only as *We* never took chances. Whispered-of, terrible, and world-embracing, desperate upshot of the times in its principles of dynamitism, war, and panclasm—that was *We*.

The question hung in the air for a long moment. Then Ryd, with an effort, said, "Sure." A moment later it struck him that the monosyllabic assent was suspicious; he added quickly, "I got nothing to lose, see?" It was, he realized, the cold truth.

"You won't lose," said Mury. He seemed to relax. But the menace within which he had clothed himself clung, as he turned back on the way they had come.

Ryd followed dog-like, his feet in their worn shoes moving without his volition. He was frightened. Out of his very fright came a longing to placate Mury, assure him that he, Ryd, was on the same side whatever happened. . . .

After some steps he stole a sidelong glance at his tall companion, and whined, "Where . . . where we going now?"

Mury paused in his long stride, removed a hand from a pocket of the gray topcoat

that wrapped him as in somber thoughts. Wordlessly, he pointed as Ryd had known he would—toward where a pale man-made dawn seemed breaking over Pi Mesa.

II

"**O**NE BLOW for freedom!" said Mury with caught breath. His voice fell upon air scarcely stilled since the sodden thump of the blow that had killed the guard.

The body lay between them, face down on the graveled way in the inky moon-shadow. On one side Pi Mesa stretched away two hundred yards to drop sharply into the night; on the other was the unlighted mass of the long, continuous, low buildings that housed now unused fuel pumps and servicing equipment. Looking down at the dead huddle at his feet, a little stunned by the reality of this, Ryd knew that he was in it now. He was caught in the machinery.

Mury hefted the length of steel in his hand once more, as if testing the weight that had crushed a man's skull so easily. Then, with a short wrist-flip, he sent it flying into the dried weeds which had overgrown the aero field on the mesa's rim during the summer months after State order had grounded all fliers in America.

"All right, Ryd," he said coolly. "Trade clothes with this fellow. I've brought you this far—you're taking me the rest of the way."

The rest of the way.

Ryd was still panting, and his side was paining from the strenuous exertion of the long climb up the side of the mountain, far from the guarded highway. His fingers, numbed by the cold of the high, thin air, shook as he knelt and fumbled with the zippers of the dead guard's uniform. The belted gun, however, was heavy and oddly comforting as he clumsily buckled it about his hips. He knew enough of weapons to recognize this as, not the usual paralyzer, but a flame pistol, powerful and deadly. He let his hand linger on its butt; then strong fingers tightened on his bony wrist, and he looked up with a start into the sardonic black eyes of the Panclast.

"No use now for firearms," said Mury. "All the guns we could carry wouldn't help us if we were caught out there. That gun

is just a stage property for the little play we're going to give in about three minutes—when you'll act a guardsman escorting me, a Poligerent of Dynamopolis, aboard the towship *Shahrazad*."

For a moment Ryd felt relief—he had hazily imagined that Mury's hatred of Mars and all things Martian might have led him to try to sabotage the Martian warship which lay somewhere on the runways beyond the long, low buildings, and which would be closely guarded. But the towship would also be guarded . . . he shivered in the cold, dry night air.

Mury had melted into the shadow a few yards away. There was a light scraping, then a green flame sputtered, briefly lighting up his hands and face, and narrowing at once to a thin, singing needle of light. He had turned a pocket electron torch against the lock-mechanism of a small, disused metal door.

Ryd watched in painful suspense. There was no sound in his ears save for the hard, dry shrilling of the ray as it bit into the steel. It seemed to be crying: *run, run*—but he remembered the power that knew how to punish better than the law, and stood still, shivering.

The lock gave way and the door slipped aside. A light went on inside, and Ryd's heart stopped, backfired, and started again, raggedly. The same automatic mechanism that had turned the lights on had started the air-fresher, which picked up speed with a soft whine, sweeping out the long-stale atmosphere. Mury motioned to Ryd to follow him in.

IT WAS still musty in the narrow passage, between the closely-pressing walls, beneath the great tubes and cable sheathings that fluted the ceiling overhead. A stairway spiraled up on the right to the control cupola somewhere overhead; even in the airtight gallery a thin film of dust lay on every step. Up there were the meters and switches of the disused terminal facilities of the spaceport; beyond the metal door marked CAUTION, just beyond the stairwell, lay the long runway down which the ships of space had glided to be serviced, refueled, and launched into the sky once more by now dormant machines.

"Wait," said Mury succinctly; he van-

ished up the spiral stair, his long legs taking two steps at a time. After an aching minute's silence, he was back. All was clear as seen from the turret-windows overhead.

They emerged in shadow, hugging the wall. Almost a quarter of a mile to the right the megalith of the Communications Tower, crowned with many lights where the signal-men sat godlike in its summit. Its floodlights shed a vast oval of light out over the mesa, where the mile-long runways—no longer polished mirror-like as in the days of Dynamopolis' glory—stretched away into the darkness of the table land. A handful of odd ships—mere remnant of the hundreds that Pi Mesa port had berthed—huddled under the solenoid wickets, as if driven together by the chill of the thin, knife-like wind that blew across the mesa.

As the two paced slowly across the runways, Ryd had a sense of protective isolation in the vast impersonality of the spaceport. Surely, in this Titanic desolation of metal slabs and flat-roofed buildings, dominated by the one great tower, total insignificance must mean safety for them.

And indeed no guard challenged them. There were armed men watching for all intruders out on the desert beyond the runways, but once inside, Ryd's borrowed blue seemed to serve as passport enough. Nonetheless, the passport's knees were shaking when they stood at last, inconspicuous still, at the shadowed base of the Communications Tower.

Not far off, a half-dozen dignitaries, huddled close together in the midst of these Cyclopean man-made things that dwarfed their policies, their principles and ambitions, stood talking rather nervously with two officers, aristocratically gaudy in the scarlet of the Martian Fleet. Blue-clad guardsmen of Earth watched from a distance—watched boredly enough.

And out on the steel-stripped tarmac, under the solenoid of Number Two Runway, lay a towship, backed like a stegosaurus with its massive magnets—the *Shahrazad*, panting like a dragon amid rolling clouds of steam. She was plainly ready to go into space. The bottom dropped out of Ryd's stomach before he realized that a warning at least must be sounded before

the ship could lift. But that might come any moment now.

"Relax," said Mury in a low voice. "Nothing's gone wrong. We'll be aboard the *Shahrazad* when she lifts." For a moment his black eyes shifted, hardening, toward Runway Four. The Martian warship lay there beyond the solenoid, a spiteful hundred-foot swordfish of steel, with blind gunvalves, row on row, along its sleek sides and turret-blisters. It had not yet been tugged onto the turntable; it could not be leaving again very soon, though Earth weight was undoubtedly incommoding its crew. About it a few figures stood that were stiffly erect and immobile, as tall as tall men. From head to toe they were scarlet.

"Robots!" gasped Ryd, clutching his companion's arm convulsively. "Martian soldier robots!"

"They're unarmed, harmless. They aren't your police with built-in weapons. Only the humans are dangerous. But we've got to move. For God's sake, take it easy."

Ryd licked dry lips. "Are we going—out into space?"

"Where else?" said Mury.

THE official-looking individual in the expensive topcoat and sport hat had reached the starboard airlock of the towship before anyone thought to question his authorization, escorted as he was by a blue-uniformed guardsman. When another sentry, pacing between runways a hundred yards from the squat space vessel, paused to wonder, it was—as it came about—just a little too late.

The guard turned and swung briskly off to intercept the oddly-behaving pair, hand crowding the butt of his pistol, for he was growing uneasy. His alarm mounted rapidly, till he nearly sprained an ankle in sprinting across the last of the two intervening runways, between the solenoid wickets. Those metal arches, crowding one on the other in perspective, formed a tunnel that effectively shielded the *Shahrazad's* airlocks from more distant view; the gang of notables attracted by the occasion was already being shepherd back to safety by the Communications guards, whose attention was thus well taken up.

The slight man in guardsman's blue

glanced over his shoulder and vanished abruptly into the circular lock. His companion wheeled on the topmost step, looking down with some irritation on his unhandsome face, but with no apparent doubt of his command of the situation.

"Yes?" he inquired frostily.

"What goes on here?" snapped the guard, frowning at the tall figure silhouetted against the glow in the airlock. "The crew's signaled all aboard and the ship lifts in two minutes. You ought to be—"

"I am Semul Mury, Poligerent for the City of Dynamopolis," interrupted the tall man with asperity. "The City is naturally interested in the delivery of the power which will revivify our industries." He paused, sighed, shifting his weight to the next lower step of the gangway. "I suppose you'll want to re-check my credentials?"

The guard was somewhat confused; a Poligerent, in ninth-century bureaucracy, was a force to be reckoned with. But he contrived to nod with an appearance of brusqueness.

Fully expecting official papers, signed and garnished with all the pompous seals of a chartered metropolis, the guard was dazed to receive instead a terrific left-handed foul to the pit of the stomach, and as he reeled dizzily, retching and clawing for his gun, to find that gun no longer holstered but in the hand of the self-styled Poligerent, pointing at its licensed owner.

"I think," Mury said quietly, flexing his left wrist with care the while his right held the gun steady, "that you'd better come aboard with us."

The guard was not more cowardly than the run of politically-appointed civic guardsmen. But a flame gun kills more frightfully than the ancient electric chair. He complied, grasping the railing with both hands as he stumbled before Mury up the gangway—for he was still very sick indeed, wholly apart from his bewilderment, which was enormous.

Above, Ryd Randl waited in the lock, flattened against the curved wall, white and jittering. The inner door was shut, an impenetrable countersunk mirror of metal.

"Cover him, Ryd," ordered Mury flatly. In obedience Ryd lugged out the heavy

flame pistol and pointed it; his finger was dangerously tremulous on the firing lever. He moistened his lips to voice his fears; but Mury, pocketing the other gun, threw the three-way switch on the side panel, the switch that should have controlled the inner lock.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, God. We're caught. We're trapped!" The outer gangway had slid up, the lock wheezed shut, forming an impenetrable crypt of niosteel.

MURY smiled with supernal calm. "We won't be here long," he said. Then, to quiet Ryd's fears, he went on: "The central control panel and the three local switches inside, between, and outside the locks are on the circuit in that order. Unless the locks were closed from the switch just beyond the inner lock, that lock will open when the central control panel is cut out in preparation for lifting."

Almost as he paused and drew breath, a light sprang out over the switch he had closed and the inner lock swung silently free of its gaskets. Ryd felt a trembling relief; but Mury's voice lashed out like a whip as he slipped cat-like into the passage.

"Keep him covered. Back out of the lock."

Ryd backed—the white, tense face of the prisoner holding his own nervous gaze—and, almost out of the lock, stumbled over the metal pressure rings. And the gun was out of his unsure grip, clattering somewhere near his slithering feet, as he started to fall.

He saw the guardsman hurl himself forward; then he was flung spinning, back against the engine-room door. In a flash, even as he struggled to keep on his feet, he saw the man in the airlock coming up from a crouch, shifting the pistol in his right hand to reach its firing lever; he saw Mury sidestep swiftly and throw the master control switch outside.

The inner lock whooshed shut, barely missing Ryd. At the same instant, the flame gun lighted locks and passage with one terrific flash, and a scorched, discolored spot appeared on the beveled metal of the opposite lock a foot from Mury's right shoulder.

"You damned clumsy little fool—" said Mury with soft intensity. Then, while the

air around the metal walls still buzzed and snapped with blue sparks, he whirled and went up the control-room gangway in two quick bounds. Even as he went the flame gun thundered again in the starboard airlock.

Mury was just in time, for the pilot had been about to flash "Ready" to the Communications Tower when the explosions had given him pause. But the latter and his two companions were neither ready nor armed; clamped in their seats at the controls, already marked, they were helpless in an instant before the leveled menace of the gun. And the imprisoned guardsman, having wasted most of his charges, was helpless, too, in his little cell of steel.

"It's been tried before," said one of the masked men. He had a blond, youthful thatch and a smooth healthy face below the mask, together with an astrogator's triangled stars which made him *ex officio* the brains of the vessel. "Stealing a ship—it can't be done any more."

"It's been done again," said Mury grimly. "And you don't know the half of it. But—you will. I'll need you. As for your friends—" The gun muzzle shifted slightly to indicate the pilot and the engineer. "Out of those clamps. You're going to ride this out in the portside airlock."

He had to repeat the command, in tones that snapped with menace, before they started with fumbling, rebellious hands to strip their armor from themselves. The burly engineer was muttering phrases of obscene fervor; the weedy young pilot was wild-eyed. The blond astrogator, sitting still masked and apparently unmoved, demanded:

"What do you think you're trying to do?"

"What do *you* think?" demanded Mury in return. "I'm taking the ship into space. On schedule and on course—to meet the power shell." The flame gun moved with a jerk. "And as for you—what's your name?"

"Yet Arliess."

"You want to make the trip alive, don't you, Yet Arliess?"

The young astrogator stared at him and at the gun through masking goggles; then he sank into his seat with a slow shudder. "Why, yes," he said as if in wonder, "I do."

III

SHAHRAZAD drove steadily forward into deep space, vibrating slightly to the tremendous thrust of her powerful engines. The small, cramped cabin was stiflingly hot to the three armored men who sat before its banked dials, watching their steady needles.

Ryd had blacked out, darkness washing into his eyes and consciousness draining from his head, as the space ship had pitched out into emptiness over the end of the runway on Pi Mesa and Mury had cut in the maindrive. Pressure greater than anything he had ever felt had crushed him; his voice had been snatched from his lips by those terrible forces and lost beneath the opening thunder of the three-inch tubes. Up and up, while the acceleration climbed to seven gravities—and Ryd had lost every sensation, not to regain them until Earth was dropping away under the towship's keel.

A single gravity held them back and down in the tilted seats, and the control panels seemed to curve half above them, their banks of lights confused with the stars coldly through the great nose window. In the control room all sounds impinged on a background made up of the insect hum of air-purifiers, the almost super-sonic whine of the fast-spinning gyroscopes somewhere behind them, the deep continuous growl of the engines.

Mury's voice broke through that steady murmur, coming from Ryd's right. "You can unfasten your anticlamps, Ryd," he said dryly. "That doesn't mean you," to the young navigator, on his other hand as he sat in the pilot's seat with his pressure-clamps thrown back and his gloved hands free to caress the multiplex controls before him. Clipped to the sloping dash at his left elbow was a loaded flame gun.

Ryd emerged, with much bungling, from his padded clamps, and shook his head groggily as he ran a hand through his slightly thinning hair. He ventured shakily, "Where are we?"

Mury smiled slightly. "Only our astrogator," he indicated Arliess, still masked and fettered, "can tell you that with precision. I understand only enough of astrogational practice to make sure that he is holding to the course outlined on the

log. For that matter . . . he is an intelligent young man and if he were not blinded by notions of duty to an outworn system . . . We are now somewhere near the orbit of the Moon. Isn't that right, Arliess?"

The other did not seem to hear; he sat staring blindly before him through his goggles at the slowly-changing chart, where cryptic lights burned, some moving like glowing paramécia along fine-traced luminous tracks.

Mury too sat silent and immobile for a minute or more. Then, abruptly, he inclined his universal chair far to the right, and his long frame seemed to tense oddly. His finger stabbed out one of the sparks of light.

"What's that, Arliess?"

The astrogator broke his silence. "A ship."

"I know that well enough. What ship?"

"I supposed you had examined the log. It would have told you that that's the liner *Alborak*, out of Aeropolis with a diplomatic mission for Mars."

Mury shook his head regretfully. "That won't wash, Arliess. Even if you suppose her off course, no liner aspace ever carried a tenth of that drive."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Arliess. But his voice was raw and unsteady.

"I'm talking about this. That ship is a warship, and it's looking for us—will intercept us inside of twenty minutes at the most!"

ARLIESS turned his head at last, slowly, as if the movement were painful. His dispassionate goggles regarded the telltale needles that had come quiveringly alive on the radiodetector box between them, bluntly giving the lie to the automatic chart. "You know more than I supposed," he said, and laughed unpleasantly. "But it won't do you any good now. We're to be inspected in space—a surprise of which we weren't informed until a few minutes before you came sneaking into the ship."

"That's too bad," said Mury. He sounded as if he thought it was too bad. As he spoke, he leaned sidewise, to the left this time, and closed a switch, lighting a darkened panel on the board; his long forefinger selected and pressed two studs. "Too

bad," he repeated, and picked up the flame pistol. Young Arliess exploded in another furious surge against the binding clamps, clawing with clumsy gloved hands for the release; then he quieted, and stared at the small black bore trained on him.

He was trembling a little with fury. "You damned louse. Why don't you make it a clean job by giving it to me, now?"

"I'll need you, now if not before," said the Panclast softly. "Your friends would have stayed alive if that warship hadn't showed its nose. You must understand that. I was forced into counter-measures."

Then Ryd, squirming sidewise in his seat, understood. Those studs had controlled the outer airlocks. And now the men who had been in those locks, the young guardsman and the *Shahrazad's* pilot and engineer—were no longer there.

"You—need me?" Arliess was briefly incredulous. "Oh—I get it. There have to be three in the crew." Then he sprang like a tiger.

But the moment in which he had thumbed the release and wrenched free of the padded clamps had been too long. Ryd flinched away—but there was no roar, no flame stabbed blue. They grappled an instant, swaying on the tilted floor—and then the pistol, reversed in Mury's hand, chopped down on Arliess' temple, a glancing blow, but fiercely struck.

The astrogator let go, staggering; and the gun swung up again and felled him.

Mury let the pistol drop into his own crew-seat, and, lugging Arliess under the arms, got him into his seat with a grunting heave. He said breathlessly, regretfully, "It was the only way . . ." The mask came off at once; the shock-pale face that emerged was even more youthful than Ryd had thought. The red trickle across the forehead was startling against its pallor.

Ryd sat staring—unshaken by the thought of yet another murder, but with a knot of fear tightening in his stomach as he thought of the warship somewhere out of their vision, questing nearer with every racing second—while the motors throbbed, the airvalves sang softly, and the gyroscopes whinned somewhere.

And Mury's long, brown fingers explored rapidly through the stunned man's blond thatch; he nodded with satisfaction,

and then with sure motions secured Arliess in his place. Ryd, on peremptory gesture, did for himself the same, with fingers that were oddly numb and jointless.

Then Mury was back in the pilot's chair. For a moment he sat as if poised, staring into starry space with knitted brows; then he reached far over, in front of the sagging astrogator, and with a decisive flick of the wrist switched on the ship's magnets to their full power.

"What's that for?" stammered Ryd, bewildered and more than a little scared. "Why—"

Mury made no answer. Instead, he had fixed once more on the detector box, watching it intently as the minutes crawled. The movements by which he secured his own anticlamps were automatonlike.

TWICE the needles jumped briefly. Mury did not stir. But when they began to swing slowly over the scale, his hands leaped at the control studs; in the next instant *Shahrazad* leaped and shivered, and a powerful acceleration fought to lever them out of their seats. The noise was deafening; one thin layer of sound proofing was between the cabin and the one-inch tubes of the overdrive.

Ryd's eyes rolled up in his head and grew filmed; the control room for him a blur of dizzy flame. He almost blacked out again; he seemed to see the face of the white Moon, leprously diseased, float like a runaway balloon past the curved nose window and disappear below his topsy-turvy field of vision; but he couldn't be sure it wasn't his own head spiraling away from its moorings. And then it was over and the ship bored steadily along her new tangent through space.

But now she vibrated yet more deeply to the great thrust of the afterdrive, and the light blurred more and grew dim. *Shahrazad* raced into darkness, and the needles that told of a magnetic mass somewhere not far ahead, cutting swiftly through her far-flung field, swung steadily over.

Then *bang!* in one unreverberating explosion, and the ship bucked hard and the blurred lights came down in a rain of fiery pinwheels. The motor died with a snap. Silence rang and Ryd's stomach boiled with weightlessness; slowly his eyes could see again. *Shahrazad* held straight

on her course toward some unknown target star; the gyroscopes still whined.

"Seven thousand feet a second," came Mury's voice from nowhere. "That's the speed at which we overran the meteoroid. It wouldn't have been nice if it had come through here; the armor before the control panel would have stopped it if it didn't strike higher . . ."

Ryd fell to shuddering. He mouthed with difficulty, "My God, you don't hit meteors on purpose!"

"You damned well do," said Mury crisply, "if you have to." His manner brought a sort of frightened admiration into Ryd's dark, unsteady eyes. Mury added, with apparent lack of connectedness, "Astrogators' heads don't just crack themselves on switch handles." The underdrive, roaring alive as he pressed the bottom stud on the control circle, caught Ryd's breath against his diaphragm and left him none to answer with if he had wished to.

She leveled out on course with short jerky bursts from the various banks of tubes. Mury was doing all his own courseplotting now, and his teeth were sunk in his lower lip as he frowned at the charts and at the rows of figures that spun into view on the calculator. He was still correcting feverishly when the stars dimmed and space throbbled like a tympanum.

A voice clanged through the strobophones. "*Shahrazad! Algot* calling *Shahrazad!* Cut your drive to one vertical gravity. We will parallel and send a boat across. That is all."

Mury's right hand moved slightly on the sloping ledge and closed the throttle. The forward thrust again collapsed into weightlessness, and the *Shahrazad* seemed to hang motionless for a moment before the underdrive took up the load. And meanwhile the meters told their tale of the swift onrush of the great battle cruiser in whose forward sphere of exhaust gases they already flew. Across the starry sky ahead crept a vast belt of hazy light like a zodiacal glow.

"The *Algot*," said Mury musingly. A stellar dreadnaught. They aren't sparing precautions . . . Abruptly he dropped his right hand from the dashboard, grasped a sheathed wire that curved away beneath the radiodetector box, and detached

it with a brisk jerk. The needles dropped instantly to a uniform zero. The chain of causation was complete.

SO THERE was no warning of the approach of the space-boat. It bumped alongside and grappled to the towship's starboard airlock a couple of minutes later; Ryd stiffened, drew a long breath, and held it as if he would hold it forever. Mury, hand steady, depressed the studs that opened the lock . . . for the second time since the ship had lifted.

The man who came aboard, from the warship hanging somewhere out there among the stars, was the very avatar of the Fleet in that second decade of the ninth century. Incarnate in space-blue and silver stars, with smoothly smiling face, shaven with a more than military meticulousness, that radiated power and the confidence of power. Power flanked and overshadowed his medium-tall figure, in the shape of two armed robot marines. The eyes of the Panclast masked their smoldering lights as they met those beneath the winged officer's cap; but the latter, aristocratically bored, noticed little or nothing.

"You appear to have had an accident, Captain Yaher," said the lieutenant with unblinking calm. "We noticed from a distance that your undershell was badly scored as if by collision with some solid body. Unfortunately . . . and remarkably. Is any of your equipment out of order?"

Mury shrugged without effort, jerked a gloved thumb at the dangling wire. The lieutenant raised narrow eyebrows.

"Damaged before you lifted?"

"We were inspected thoroughly on the runway. It must have happened during initial acceleration."

The other frowned, fine vertical lines creasing his smooth forehead. "Odd."

Mury smiled a thin, crooked smile. "You military men don't know what can happen aboard a run-down towship. Anything, literally. The merchant fleet isn't at its best since the embargo."

"I know," said the officer curtly. "Even in the Fleet—" He stopped short, and his eyes, shifting, found a new subject ready-made in the slumped figure of Arliess. "Was this man seriously injured, Captain?"

"Just stunned, I think. He's an astro-gator, and astrogators are tough."

THE OFFICER laughed perfunctorily. He moved forward and made a brief, distasteful examination of Arliess' tousled head, then stepped back, rubbing his fingers together.

"There's no fracture. But if he's concussed, he's in no shape to stand heavy acceleration."

Mury said smoothly, "We're not going to be using any. We're up to speed and our orders are to handle that power cylinder like a soap bubble."

The young lieutenant stroked his smooth chin, standing with feet braced against the tilt of the floor beneath which the rockets rumbled steadily, holding him erect as if under Earth gravity. The two men at the control board watched him with stares equilly unblinkingly but far different in sentiment. Mury's was inscrutable; it might have veiled anything. Ryd's was all sick fear and certainty that something would betray them before the nerve-racking scene was played out.

"I think," said the blue-clad officer, "that if it won't incommode you too much to hold this acceleration a bit longer—"

"Not at all," said Mury, and Ryd silently but no less hysterically cursed his facile confidence.

"... I'll cross over again and send a ship's doctor to attend to your astrogator. A shot in the arm should bring him around."

Mury nodded placidly. The officer turned casually, spoke to the two blue-chromiumed robots, who faced about smartly; then, snapping his fingers, their master wheeled once more. "Just a moment. I almost forgot this. . . . Strangely enough, one of my men stumbled over it in your starboard lock." He fumbled inside his tunic a moment, displayed in his hand a heavy .20 service flame gun.

A flat and terrible silence lay in the control room. Then Mury broke it, as it had to be broken quickly:

"We weren't supposed to have any arms aboard. I can't say where that came from."

"Can't say, eh?" said the other musingly. Ryd, cold sweat on his forehead, stared in horrid fascination, first at the man and then at the fighter robots. He

tensed himself to fight back, now, at the last, like a cornered rat—he hardly knew how or why.

With a shrug, the officer dropped the weapon into his pocket. "Ah, well—so many of these little mysteries remain just that. We mustn't hold up Terra's power supply." He turned once more to go. "I'll have the medico here in a flicker."

The trio passed out through the wispering locks, out to the waiting spaceboat. Ryd found that his mouth was parchments-dry; he stared at the apparently unshaken Mury, and drew a shuddering breath.

"I guess," he said jerkily, "we fooled them."

Mury smiled. "Yes," he agreed. "We fooled them this time."

Then a thought jolted Ryd; he gasped, "Listen! Did you think about— That battleship might have picked up those guys you dropped out of the locks! They've got us right here—we can't get away—maybe they're just—"

"Why would they?" Mury shrugged again. "But that chance had to be taken. Space is rather big, you know."

IV

IT WAS NOT more than three minutes later that young Arliess began to twitch and mutter under the neuromuscular impact of a cc. of arterially-injected *vitamin*. The Fleet doctor straightened and returned his small, bright needle to its velvet-lined case, snapping it shut hurriedly.

"He'll recover consciousness within a very few minutes. You'll be wanting to be on your way, no doubt. . . ."

When the doctor had escaped gratefully from the *Shahrazad's* topsy-turvy gravity, Mury gave power to the overdrive, sent the ship swinging back into a course for the point of intersection with the flight of the power projectile. The great curve that had taken them off the planet had placed them now almost directly in front of that hurtling objective; *Shahrazad*, still slowly gathering additional momentum, would be overtaken by the cargo shell at the moment that she reached a velocity practically equal with its own.

To ensure that, Mury's long, skillful

fingers twirled a vernier, finely adjusting the fuel flow into the disintegration chambers behind the after bulkhead, and with it the volume of steam which, smashed to atoms, was hurled at stupendous velocity from the driving jets to propel the rocket ship. An acceleration just a trifle under one gravity—the calculator clicked out its results down to six decimals. The gyroscopes locked the township in its new groove in space.

Yet Arliess jerked ineffectually in his clamps, cried out thickly. His eyes came stickily open behind their square goggles. He sat stiff and still for a long minute.

Ryd underwent a considerable egoflation in his contempt for this other man's defeat. It had been long since he had known the savage joy of winning.

Arliess said weakly, raising both hands to press flat against his temples, "Where—are we?" The same words Ryd had whimpered not so long ago.

Mury turned slightly to look at the astrogator out of the corners of his eyes. He said deliberately, "We're past. Inspection's over, and—thanks largely to you, Yet Arliess, we're clear."

The young man sat for a moment with head buried in his hands. Then he looked up and out toward the motionless star fields that glittered ahead.

"So?" he said bitterly. "What next? Are you going to try to steal the power shell? And if so, where are you going to escape to? I suppose you realize that you'd have to scoot right out of the System to even get clear of the *Algol's* guns—and there are four other Earth dreadnaughts in planetary space alone?"

Arliess' words, coldly confident of a victory that would be death for him, chilled Ryd. But he took heart from Mury's jeering laughter.

"Do you think I'd have come this far if I had feared your dreadnaughts? *They'll* have enough to think of before the next twenty-four hours are past, when they are hurled in battle against all the power of Mars!"

Arliess stiffened. "Are you crazy? There's no war in the air. A year ago, yes, perhaps—but now, with the treaties signed and trade resuming—"

"And Earth," snapped Mury, "sold for that very trade into the hands of the Mar-

tian overlords. No, war is preferable—and we'll have war, now."

"You talk," said Arliess in a curiously flat voice, "as if the choice of courses rested in your hands."

"It does. Or rather, it will—so soon as I hold in these hands the weapon of the power projectile."

MURY'S voice became orotund. His hands rested lightly on the pilot's controls before him and he gazed into space-darkness as if toward an invisible dawn. "When a Terrestrial city goes skyward in one terrific blast of disintegration—When Pi Mesa and Dynamopolis vanish together from the face of Earth in a warningless holocaust—Then Earth will realize the truth, if only through deception."

Ryd's veins were trickling ice water instead of warm blood, and his nerve centers were paralyzed. It was too big for him, and his courage was gone again.

Mury talked on, and his voice was that of one sincerely and earnestly trying to convince:

"Earth's government has made peace with the Martians, but the instinct of the people infallibly distrusts the treacherous rival world. Why not—since Mars is indeed ready and avid to topple Earth from her old place as the mother-planet, mistress of the System? Mars, with twice Earth's area and five times the sunlight to drive his heliodynes—Mars with his robot millions and his human oligarchy athirst for power and glory, intoxicated with the strength of a new, raw, rich world. Only if we fight now can we escape domination. I am going to strike the blow that will wake Earth to battle, and bring her at last through pain and repentance to her age-old greatness!"

Shahrzad hurtled steadily on before the long hydrogen flares of her afterdrive, and three men sat behind her controls—and their triumph and fear and hate might have been strong enough to reach out beyond the metal shell and form an auro, not so bright but more fiercely potent, about the rushing ship.

Then young Arliess said through his teeth, "You know damn well it won't work."

"It will," said the Panclast, preternat-

urally calm, while his eyes were watchful on the slowly shifting dials. Somewhere behind them in bleak space sixty tons of concentrated hell was creeping up.

"You can't deceive a whole planet," exclaimed Arliess rapidly, desperately. "You can't plunge them into a war that will cost a hundred million lives, that will wreck the cities and the commerce of the whole System. There hasn't been war for seventy years . . . between Earth and Mars, never . . ." His voice trailed off and he gasped for breath as if the cabin had grown stifling.

"It is almost done," said Mury solemnly. With the words he cut off the afterdrive. Silence fell clublike, mind-numbing after the pounding of the rockets.

Arliess spoke again, with all the feeling washed out of his voice. "Where do you and your pal come out on this?" he demanded carefully. "You don't think you can get away with this, do you, even if you succeed in blowing up Dynamopolis?"

"There are some things I can't reveal even now, slight as are the chances of failure," said Mury smoothly. "We won't be caught, though; I can tell you that surely. And you'll accompany us to our destination. It would be best if you did so willingly." Ryd thought he knew what was implicit in the Panclast's words. There would be some hiding-place maintained by the secret power of We. In Antarctica, perhaps, as rumor whispered. Ryd clung hard to his new faith in Mury, and was warmed by it. He dreamed. . . . Perhaps, he, Ryd, in some new world to come from chaos . . .

MURY thumbed a stud; the sidethrust of the starboard drive made the counterpoised seats tilt far to the left. Then, as they drifted in free flight again: "Perhaps, since you have heard the truth, Arliess, you would like to join our cause. Secret now, it will soon be victorious over all Earth . . . a cause of glory which will have its heroes. . . ."

The astrogator gazed stonily ahead. "You may be right," he said stiffly, strangely. "But right on wrong, you're mad. Mad with power."

The other laughed softly. "That's very true. It is a little heady. The power that

will rock any planet—power indeed!"

All at once the stars were darkened. From overhead as the ship was oriented, a long black shape, picked out by patterned lights, drove past and dwindled into the flaming constellations. The power shell had arrived. Words were at an end.

Instead, there roared out the mighty voices of the after tubes. The sustained forward leap of the ship took breath from their bodies. But the colored lights came slipping back out of the starfields, their pattern expanding swiftly as seconds passed. As suddenly as he had accelerated, Mury closed the throttle, cut in the fore-drive, and started braking his speed. Then, with delicate spurts of power from all the rockets, he brought the *Shahrazad's* speed and course to parallel that of the great projectile which coasted effortlessly through space less than a mile away.

In the weightless pause, Mury said quietly to the astrogator: "The magnet controls are before you, Arliess. Would it be too much strain on your conscience to operate them now?"

The board had been built for efficiency; of the minor duties aboard the vessel, communications was assigned to the engineer, control of the powerful grapples to the astrogator, on the theory that while intership communication might be needed simultaneously with the use of the magnets, the plotting of the course would not so coincide. The strobophones and radio—the latter dead and lightless at the moment—fronted Ryd as he fidgeted in the engineer's place.

Arliess had delayed a moment. Now he answered harshly, "All right. What do you want?"

"I was sure you would see. . . . Your cooperation won't be difficult. The magnet rheostat is already stopped at the safety maximum for the fuel we're going to handle. Give them all full power, then." Ryd knew vaguely that too powerful magnetic fields upset delicate atomic balances, had in fact caused the great Tenebris disaster of 803 on Venus—a match-sputter, that, compared to what would soon hit North America—

Woodenly, Arliess gave the magnets power. Unseen, his hands curled themselves tensely inside his sweat-slip-

perry rubberized gloves; he was dangerously near hysteria. His keen, youthful imagination could see all too clearly into the near future. Over half of Earth, the skies would be red; there would be storm and earthquake, mountains splitting, rivers in flood, the fires of new volcanoes.

Shahrazad picked up speed again, swinging in to intercept the power cylinder in its constant flight. She forged forward on bright wings of flame, a small, squat ship of Fate, not a part but a target. rest on her broad plated back.

"Half magnets," said Mury shortly, firing another bank of tubes to correct his course. Still robot-like, Arliess obeyed. His right hand obeyed. But his left snaked very slowly off the dash, under the detector box at his elbow, captured a dangling wire. Then—bend this way, bend that way, bend this way—

The last power-thrust died. Inch by inch, *Shahrazad* and the fuel shell drifted together in their parallel courses. "Full magnets," ordered Mury, and the drift accelerated. For two long, waiting minutes it continued; then the towship lurched slightly, like a boat meeting a long swell, and the great masses met with a prolonged grinding of curving steel on stegosauric plates of iron. A moment while they settled solidly together and clung, locked; then the rockets roared once more to life and *Shahrazad* surged ahead evenly. To the greatly-overpowered towship, the mere sixty tons of the loaded cargo shell made little or no difference.

Mury sat bolt upright in his universal chair. His face was masked and serene, but the straight line of his head and neck was eloquent. His hand, resting lightly on the controls, was that of Zeus, gripping a thunderbolt.

Slowly, without speaking, he drove the ship's nose upward—upward as they were leveled off, but in reality downward, for gradually from overhead the great black curve of a planet's dark limb crept down, shutting out the stars. Then its sunlit side burst into sight and the pallid glare came flooding through the great nose window to make the glow-lamps needless.

It was Earth, and somewhere on that great globe, where the distorted shape of North America sprawled through half a dark hemisphere, was Pi Mesa. For this

ship of Fate, not a port but a grim target.

Then Yet Arliess' voice fell hard and deadly on that triumphant moment.

"Mury. Cut the drive!"

Mury's attention snapped to the astrogator. Even so with the back of his head to Ryd, the latter could see the slow tensing of his spare body, the sudden immobility that took him. Ryd froze.

"You'd better think twice, Arliess," said Mury in a low, brittle tone.

"Cut the drive," ordered Arliess again. "This is journey's end, Mury. If you don't cut it now, we'll all die."

RYD INCHED forward in his seat; his fingers, numbed as if the cold of sheer space had crept into the cabin, found the release. Then he was able to see Arliess, hunched forward close to his control board. One hand clenched over the magnet rheostat; but something had gone wrong. The astrogator had bent the synthyl handle out and away from its contacts; and now something gleamed half-hidden in his hand. Its ends were almost touching the inner contact of the switch handle and the minimum-resistance tap of the rheostat coil—a short piece of bared silver wire, whose placing between those contacts would send current leaping through the shortened circuit and pouring full into the maget coils. It would envelop *Shahrazad* and power cylinder in a field of great intensity—but of brief duration, a fractional instant before the equilibrium of the stored atoms toppled and towship and cargo shell, together like one, vanished in one exploding flame, brighter than the Sun.

This was the end. Mury was beaten, and of course he, Ryd, was beaten too. For keeps, this time. With maudlin self-pity, he saw himself as one caught and singled out for destruction by the gods in the machine.

"Cut the drive," repeated Arliess for the third time.

Still the Panclast did not move, and his face betrayed none of what he must feel of the terrible irony by which a bit of wire, a short circuit, could wreck the plan that was to have shaken a planet. He said without stirring, "You can't use bluff on me, Arliess."

"I know that and I'm not bluffing," said young Arliess, pale to the lips, with

burning eyes. "I know your type, Mury. The monomaniac. You're not afraid of dying, but you are afraid when the success of your mission is threatened. But you can forget those plans now. We're going to stop, flash a distress signal."

"I never meant we should escape the final crash of the power shell," said Mury. "Escape was needless to the plan, and to die in such a cause . . . But I'll make you a bargain now, Arliess. I'll let you parachute to safety when we're in the atmosphere, if you'll swear to reveal nothing. Otherwise—perhaps you are aware of the power of—*We*."

Arliess' grin was savage. "Don't try to frighten me with children's boogie-men. I know that such an organization exists, and I knew one of their members once—a poor, starved gutter-rat without principles or courage or anything but a vicious wish to kick the world that had kicked him. No, Mury, *you're* something else again."

"I've explained my aims to you, Arliess. I have no private wrongs to avenge. I have acted because all history urges Earth and Mars to the death grapple; I have been an agent of history. You, not I, are the madman if you try to stand in the way."

Arliess laughed shortly. "I hold the final argument, though. . . . *Cut the drive!*"

V

FOR A moment their eyes met. Mury, all his weapons blunted, sat unmoving. Ryd, forehead beaded, gripping the arms of his chair, afraid to move or cry out lest he bring doom upon the ship, thought he saw Arliess' fingers start to tighten.

But in that instant a voice crashed into the death-still cabin. Harsh and vibrant, it rang through the open strobophones.

"*Shahrazad!* Algol calling *Shahrazad!* You are twenty-one degrees off course and failing to correct as per schedule. What is the matter?"

"All right," said Arliess, his voice husky. "Last chance, Mury, before I blow us to atoms. Call them back. Tell them to overhaul us and board. From the intensity of that signal, they can't be far away."

And indeed, even now the stars began to blur to the approach of the battle cruiser. Plainly, it had been trailing near; the

dead detectors had told them nothing. Perhaps, after all, suspicion had been born behind the official calm facade. At any rate, here upon them were *Algol* and its guns. . . . Again the voice came through the phones, querulously now.

Mury, without making any sudden motion, pressed his release. With equal care he came to his feet, standing without effort against a little more than one gravity.

"The message sent," he said coolly, "will be 'Temporarily electrical failure. All under control.'" With that he knelt down in the narrow space between the crew-chairs and the instrument board.

"If that fool tries to jump me, Ryd, use the gun." His hands started to grope at the under panels of the control board, purposefully but without haste. "I'm going to disconnect the central fuse."

"You'll never touch it," said Arliess with a gasp. "I'm shorting the coil—*now!*"

Ryd had, in a dazed automatism, lifted the gun. It was heavy and unsteady in his gloved right hand. He stared with eyes out of focus and with a sense of nightmare; death was coming and he wanted to live, had to stop it somehow, anyhow, *now*—

Then all at once the gun steadied in his hand, burned hot as it spat its crisping thunderbolt. The cabin shook to the blast.

And the weapon slipped from Ryd's hand. He drew in air, sharp with ozone, in short sobbing gasps, and cowered in his padded seat, shaking uncontrollably. But he was alive, still alive.

Arliess crouched half in and half out of his seat. He brought up the pistol which he had snatched almost as it fell, trained it across the motionless bundle between them on the floor. Mury was dead, as dead as many another dreamer whose human tools have turned in his hands.

The astrogator snapped, "Take the strobophone sender and call *Algol*. Tell them—tell them—"

"He'd have killed us all," gasped Ryd, cringing.

He choked off as the astrogator lashed out open-handed, knocking him to the floor. The young man stood for a moment gazing down on him, hands clenched at his sides; then—

"You rat!" he snarled. "You filthy little rat!"

A RINGER FEUD BREAKS OUT



"WHY CAN'T YOU MORGANS AND SNORGS FEUD
WITH GUNS LIKE OTHER PEOPLE?"

QUEST'S END

By BASIL WELLS

Thig's quest was not yet finished, for the Hordes of Ortha had sent another ship across the Void. Only he could halt Earth's destruction—with a weapon that was but a thought in his mind.

Illustration by Doolin



"I WAS a fool," gritted Thig. His eye crowded the eyepiece of the compact metal case on the table before him. The window was open and the

ugly metal snout of the instrument pointed toward the eastern horizon. "I should have expected the men of Ortha to send a second expedition to Earth!"

Thig's compact body stiffened angrily. He came to his feet, his gaze roaming about the familiar disorder of the little boathouse. Here he came daily to write the lusty sagas of the Old West that had made the name of Lewis Terry familiar to millions of readers. Here beside the pot-bellied iron stove with the single cracked lid, he had worked long hours, striving vainly to forget that he was an alien being from another distant world.

Curiosity, a trait that no other Orthans had possessed for many thousands of years, had impelled him to construct a small, but powerful, etherscope, and trace the fate of the space ship he had deserted. It had been built of odds and ends of material at night, but it opened the heavens before him. He saw planets and suns, countless light years distant many of them, and eventually he found Ortha—in time to see the space ship being boarded out in space by patrolling Hordemen, and quickly destroyed. They were taking no chances on the spread of the contagion from Earth among the Orthans.

For the good of the Horde, the alien that was Lewis Terry knew, the patrolmen would transmit the information they received, and then destroy themselves. In their narrow philosophy of life only the Horde mattered. He had been like that when his name was Thig, and the memories of Lewis Terry were not yet part of his life.

And now another space ship was coming to Earth, coming to check on the findings of that earlier ill-fated expedition, and he alone could checkmate them! . . . If he had only kept watch on Ortha!

He had two months, possibly a few days more than that, in which to destroy this second expedition that meant conquest and certain death for all Earth's warring millions! Two months to prepare!

For the good of Ellen and the children, the children of the dead man whose identity he had stolen, he must succeed. The lusty primitives of this rich green world must never be replaced by the disciplined robot race that was the Horde.

He covered his typewriter. The lock snapped with finality as he turned the key. He flexed the muscles of great arms, much too powerful for the meek appear-

ance of the writer they were, and the blood beat hot through his squat body.

"You're staying locked," he said slowly, "until the last Hordeman is wiped from the face of Earth." He smiled grimly as he reflected that his hero was trapped atop a waterless butte with a horde of Apaches howling below.

"Hope you can stick it out for eight or nine weeks without water, Brazos," he said to the typed pages he was leaving.

THE LIFE BOAT lifted sluggishly from the sands that had covered it for two years. Thig cleared each jet carefully, and then, finding them unharmed, he bored high into the stratosphere. Behind him the submarine patrol and the air-raid posts went mildly insane. They knew that some strange craft had roared up from the beach on Long Island, but they were never to know what it was.

Ellen, Lewis Terry's wife, clenched the short letter that her husband had pressed into her hand as he kissed her earlier that evening. She did not know that he was really Thig, nor did the letter reveal that fact. If he was to die, he would die Lewis Terry. The letter told her simply that he must go away on a secret mission for several months. She understood now why the unshed tears had been bright in his eyes.

Over the United States Thig blasted the life boat, and across the Pacific. He was getting as far from Long Island as he could, and one of his plans to destroy the Orthans called for many tons of explosives. Explosives, he told himself grimly, that the yellow men would furnish.

He landed at last on a rocky strip of island that was outside the combat zone, and there commenced to lay out his trap. It would take many tons of explosives to penetrate the tough hull of the space ship he knew, but the ship must be destroyed. He had considered building a huge heat blaster, but the time was too limited and he knew how powerful were the protective shells of a space ship's skin.

Gadgets he had considered; tricks that might gain for him entry into the ship where he could turn his own decomposition blaster on his brothers—all the tricks of the writing trade had passed muster before his mind's eye—but inevitably he

returned to the decision that explosives gave the only certain means of destruction.

There was an island not far from his landing place where the men with yellow skins had stored a great quantity of munitions and supplies. The fighting front was far to the East and at night no great precautions were taken. Any approaching fleet of bombers or surface ships would be detected long before they could reach this island. Nothing but submarines.

Thig's space ship moved almost silently through the water offshore. The design of the ship that permitted no air to escape now permitted no water to enter. For many of the planets that Ortha claimed for her own possessed gaseous envelopes that were denser than water, and the Horde's ships were equipped to meet those conditions.

Softly the bow of the little craft nosed up on the beach inside the harbor, and from its single lock stepped Thig. Naked he was now, as were all Hordemen, and from the harness of flexible plastic about his body there depended a decomposition blaster and an old butcher knife that he had whetted to razor sharpness.

"You hear something?" asked one of the two guards.

"It was the waves," his comrade said, listening for a moment.

"In the darkness I can see nothing," grumbled the first Jap. "Perhaps the Marines are landing."

"Ho," laughed the other guard, "the Marines are thousands of miles away. They cannot stand against the power of our Emperor."

"It has been more than a year," said the fearful one, "and we have not yet conquered all of California. I have heard that a few Marines are still hiding in the Solomons."

"The radio does not tell you that," scoffed the guard. "We have sunk every American boat. There are no more American airplanes in the Pacific. Soon we will all move to America and have the white barbarians to wait upon us."

"Was that a Japanese bomber yesterday?" The man's rifle thunked lightly against wood. "There were circles on its wings."

"There may be a few left," was the excuse of the other guard. "Now we

must cease talking and walk our posts."

Now Thig could make out the shapes of the guards as they went their way. One of them, the short, thick yellow man was coming slowly toward the tree that sheltered Thig. Perhaps he was dreaming of the fertile valleys of America, where the white-skinned men and women would be his servants, as he walked along.

Abruptly great fingers clamped around his throat, and he felt the sting of something that slammed against his chest. His feet scuffed at the soil, and then a great roaring filled his ears.

Thig eased the limp body to the earth. The other slim guard had halted, his nervously acute ears picking up some vague sound.

"What—what was that?" he called to his comrade.

Thig eased his blaster from its holster. In a moment the guard would arouse the other members of the garrison. The distance was too great for the knife—the man would be able to fire his rifle before he reached him.

The weapon's invisible rays slammed the Jap's body backward. Even as he fell the flesh was falling, rotted by the blaster's swift decomposing action, from the man's bones. A moment later only the crumbling bones of a skeleton remained of what had been a soldier.

He loaded the little ship to its capacity with explosives from the stores on the island, and before he left he touched a match to the buildings. Then he blasted off, with the water clearing explosively from his spacer's overloaded jets to arouse the sleeping warriors of the Mikado.

AFTER that first foray Thig raided many an outlying island, and looted the sunken transports that lay in the shallow water between some of the captured islands. He mounted a heavy machine gun in the nose of his agile little craft, and many a yellow man never returned to his home landing field. By days he hid near his objectives, in the jungle or the shallow water in the shadows of a jutting coral reef, and by night he moved like a giant crab, in his space suit, among the sunken ships.

His stores of explosives he concealed in a great ring around the heart of the island

—the only practical landing spot for the space cruiser, already slackening its terrific drive as it passed Pluto. How many tons of the deadly material he had collected he could not tell, but there was already sufficient to blow the island and everything upon it into oblivion.

Time was growing short. Less than a day remained in which to bait the trap with his own ship for bait. The cruiser's detectors would pick up the *trylerium's* characteristic radiations from the pitted walls of his rocket jets—the blasting jets of all space ships were made of *trylerium*—and they would land nearby.

That he would be blown up, too, in the explosion did not matter greatly, thought Thig. Ellen, the wife of the man he had helped kill, and the children, would be safe. Earth could go on in its own bloody blundering way to a glorious future.

But first he must bring back another load, the final link in the deadly ring about the landing place. Morning was at hand. He would have to work fast. He left the load where it lay and blasted off.

The great bomber, with the circles painted on its wings, passed over the little island. It returned. The pilot shouted and bombs intended for a target several hundred miles to the south took their final plunge earthward.

The ship was bullet-scarred—off its course—and since this was Japanese-dominated water his mistake was only natural. He took the caches of munitions for enemy supply dumps.

It was his last mistake. The island dissolved into splintered fragments, and with it went the bomber and its brave crew.

THIG awaited the coming of the ship from Ortha on another island. He had accepted the destruction of his long weeks of planning with the fatalism that the Horde had taught him. Since one plan had fallen through he must use another. He would persuade the Orthans that he wanted to return to his own people, and once inside, with a little good fortune, he might be able to destroy them. He had killed his two fellows on the first expedition, but already his fertile imagination had invented a logical explanation of his presence on Earth.

As the great ship swung down past Luna his radiophone came into play. Their detectors might pick up his weak signals at this distance even though they would have no reason to expect an Orthan ship here on Earth. His whole plan was based on the strategy of luring them here before they could start a thorough exploration of Earth.

Time went by swiftly, too swiftly, for there was no answer from the ship. He thought of taking off to meet them, but already the ship must be screaming down through the upper atmosphere. He shouted into the transmitter.

A grating sound came from the receiver. A hollow sound of contact that he sensed rather than heard. A cold emotionless voice spoke in the strangely unfamiliar language of the Horde.

"Who is calling the ship from Planet 72-P-3?" it demanded.

"A fellow Hordeman from Ortha," replied Thig hurriedly. "I escaped from the space cruiser commanded by Torp, after madness claimed him. He struck down Kam first, and then attacked me. After he left me for dead, I took a lifeboat and escaped."

"You are Thig?" said the even voice of the man from Ortha.

"That is right," acknowledged the other.

"Urol, commanding the second expeditionary flight to Sector 5-Z," the Hordeman identified himself. "With me are three others: Brud, Zolg, and Turb."

"Zolg and Turb I know," said Thig. "We trained together."

"Our detectors show that your location is in the largest body of water, near the eastern shore of the principal land mass of Planet 72-P-3. Is that correct?"

"Right. There is room to berth five like yours upon this uninhabited island. Here we will be safe from the Mad Ones."

Thig could almost see the Hordeman's smooth brow furrow with the unaccustomed task of thinking. The majority of the Horde's thinking was automatic, seldom did an alien thought intrude upon their formulized system of life. He smiled tautly—another gift from the dead man whose memories he had robbed was that of humor—as he listened for Urol's answer. There could be only one logical explana-

tion for Thig's words. And Urol, like all the Hordemen, was a coldly logical being.

"There is madness on this world then?" Urol asked.

"That is right." Thig drew upon the story-telling genius of Terry as he related the carefully plotted story that would permit him entrance to the Orthan ship. They must believe him. . . .

"There is madness on this world, indeed," he went on, after a moment, "but it did not originate here. Kam and Torp, when they returned from the watery planet, Planet 72-P-2, brought back the virus of madness with them. Both of them were infected, and their brief stay on this planet served to spread the disease here also.

"All over Earth, or as we call it, 72-P-3, the madness is spreading. Where there was peace and plenty there is now war and starvation. Most of this sub-human animal race will be wiped out before this madness has run its course."

"Yet you escaped its ravages," Urol said. "Have you discovered how to control this madness?"

"But I did not escape," Thig told him. "For many days after I returned to Earth I was insane. Torp and Kam had infected me as well. But I am strong, and I threw off the disease. At intervals it recurs but I strap myself down so I cannot harm myself before the madness passes."

"By the Law of the Horde," said Urol slowly, "you should be destroyed if the disease is incurable."

"I know. I feared that another expedition would come and carry the madness back to the Harde. I kept myself alive to warn you. I will show you the ravages of the disease, and then destroy myself."

"It is good," agreed Urol. "We are preparing to land now."

The communication link snapped between them. Above the island a tiny black speck swelled until it became a vast grubby bulk of metal supported by flaring jets of gaseous fuel. The thick ship slowed its sheer drop, and with a final burst of fire from blackened jets, came to rest.

Thig looked to his decomposition blaster to see that it was thoroughly charged. This was perhaps the hundredth time he had examined his weapon. He chuckled at the ease with which the leader of the mother

planet's ship had been tricked into believing his fantastic tale. All that remained now was to gain admission into the space ship.

He left his own little life boat and walked toward the space cruiser. He reached the outer lock and attempted to open it. It was stuck. He tugged futilely at the pitted metal of the controls, and after a moment hammered at the door with a lump of volcanic rock.

A speaker from just inside the door broke in upon his labor. He dropped the rock and listened.

"Why do you attack the door?" it asked.

"The lock is stuck," answered Thig.

"No," the Hordeman's voice said, "the lock is not stuck. It is sealed against the possibility of contamination from the atmosphere of 72-P-3."

"I cannot join you?" asked Thig as calmly as he could. Despair contracted his vitals as he saw this latest plan go glimmering.

"Naturally not!" The speaker's voice showed as much surprise as it was possible for an Orthan to display. "We can take no chances on the madness infecting any of us before we carry this information back to Ortha."

"I will tell you as much as I know," said Thig. "It is fortunate that I am outside the ship."

"Yes," agreed the voice. "Better that one die instead of four. The resources of the Horde must be conserved."

ALL through that first night after the space ship landed beside his little life boat, Thig lay on his sleeping deck trying to work out another method to overcome the four Hordemen inside their sturdy cruiser.

Explosives were out; he had lost his opportunity to blast the great ship into shards when the Allied bomber had mistaken them for Japanese supplies. Trickery that would permit him to gain entrance was negated by the sealed ports and locks of the space cruiser. He could not blast an opening through the ship's skin with his decomposition blaster—it was designed to destroy only flesh or vegetable matter.

Nor could he lure a Japanese or Allied force of bombers to attack the Orthan ship. The weapons of the space cruiser would

destroy such crude-winged mechanisms as might be thrown against them, and her own hull could not be damaged save by the most concentrated surprise attack. He knew how the Earthmen would work—a cautious bomber or two could attack first, and then, too late, a swarm of fighting planes and bombers would follow.

He could not lure brave Allied fliers to their death in any such fashion, nor did he think that the yellow airmen could cause any worth-while damage—not that he cared how many of them were destroyed! He might be an alien being from another world, but there was now no more loyal American than Thig. He had permitted the identity of Lewis Terry to overcome his own entirely.

No, he would have to solve this problem by himself. Upon Thig, and Thig alone, rested the future of the two billions of mankind. If the Horde saw through his fanciful story about the disease that was carried from Venus in the bodies of Kam and Torp, Earth would soon be overrun by the Horde. The Horde was unimaginative and logical in all that it did, a robot race of super ant-beings—and they would destroy all the human race to prevent any future revolt.

But if he could somehow thwart them; destroy this expedition, or send back another mute shipload of dead bodies as he had already done, Earth might not be visited again for several centuries. And she would be ready then, with a fully developed science of her own, to beat off any invasion from Ortha.

He would have to play out the game as he had started it, until an opportunity came to strike, and then he would strike hard. He went over the story he had already told the Orthans, testing it for weak points that might give him the lie, and at last he was satisfied. In no way he had offended logic—the Great War that had spread across Earth since he first arrived would but serve to corroborate his story.

With morning the explosion of bombs brought Thig to his feet. He cursed as he saw three airplanes circling overhead. They had come to investigate the mighty explosion that had sent a tidal wave rolling over the nearby atolls probably, but this was going to make

it awkward for Thig to finish his task.

The ships were Japanese light bombers he saw. They must have seen the circles that he had painted upon his tiny space ship, and mistaken the space cruiser for a larger Allied ship of some new design.

His receiver crackled as he answered the curt demands of Urol.

"They are the Mad Ones," Thig said. "Their madness causes them to fight among themselves. They drop their puny explosives foolishly upon the homes of other human cattle, taking great pleasure in wanton slaughter."

"But why do they attack us?" asked Urol. "Our ship cannot be harmed by their containers of expanding gases!"

"It is because they are insane, their minds diseased hopelessly." Thig smiled to himself. "I will go up to meet them, and destroy them with one of their own weapons."

"That is unnecessary," said Urol, "our own armament. . . ."

THIG snapped off the receiver. He sprang to the controls, and sent the little ship rocketing skyward. He patted the heavy machine-gun that had been part of his loot from one of the sunken transports. It was mounted in the nose of his craft, and already it had knocked a score of Zeros and other Jap planes from the skies.

He dove upon one of the crawling winged enemy ships. The gun chattered briefly, and smoke and flames curled back from the doomed plane's engine. One!

Another airplane climbed clumsily up to meet this wingless metal arrow. His sights centered on the target. Abruptly the enemy ship was gone, whiffed away by the terrific invisible rays of the space cruiser's atomic batteries. Thig frowned. These Orthans!

Thig climbed. The remaining Jap ship did not attempt escape. Instead it dove straight upon its target. Down it went screaming, its wings ripping away from the fuselage with the battering of the air at this terrific speed, even as the atomic cannons blasted again and again. The space ship's guns handled awkwardly on the ground.

Suddenly, the airplane disintegrated as an atomic bolt hit it squarely. The space ship ceased firing, and Thig slipped his

ship back to earth. He clicked open his transmitter.

"You will be destroyed before we return to Ortha," said Urol. "We cannot permit one of the Horde to live whose body and brain differ from the rest of us."

"That is right," agreed Thig. "I should have killed myself before you came." He paused. "I should not have tried to warn you."

"You are wrong again," Urol told him. "This madness destroys your reason. You were right in living until we came, to warn us. Now we can warn the Horde that 72-P-3 will be unsafe for colonization for many years."

Thig felt his lips twitch into a grin. Fortunate that these ships were not equipped with telescreens. His story had convinced the methodical, robot-like Orthans. If he could keep them from learning that there was actually no madness on Earth until he could contrive to destroy them.

The next words of the commander of the space cruiser sounded thunder-loud in his ears, tumbling his plans into ruin.

"We will return to Ortha with our reports at once," said Urol.

THIG sat frozen in his seat for a long moment staring at the transmitter. If he could only be certain that the Horde would find no flaws in his story; that Earth would never know the destruction that the Horde would bring.

And then he laughed. Fool! The Orthans were unimaginative as domesticated cattle. They were robotized animals, all but devoid of intelligence. He should have remembered sooner, for he had been one of the Horde before he stole the memories of an Earthman, and fell in love with the dead man's woman!

Until he came to Earth, Thig had never known that there was such a thing as a lie. Among the men of Ortha there was no deceit or treachery. If they killed or destroyed, it was necessary. If they related any happening, however unimportant, it was painstakingly accurate. Imagination was a word that was meaningless among the disciplined billions of the Horde. They would not detect a lie for they would not recognize one! Earth was safe.

"That is good," he said. "I will wait until you leave Earth, and then I will destroy the ship and myself."

Over China they knifed, over the ruined cities and bomber fields, and down across Russia where vast armies locked in bloody combat. They saw here again great cities that were ravaged by war. Higher they climbed above the ocean, until, above North America, Thig dropped behind the great cruiser.

He called the commander of the space cruiser then.

"My fuel is almost exhausted," he said. "Prepare to dive into the Earth," said Urol in his emotionless voice. "We cannot waste the power of our ship to ray you. The senseless assaults of the madmen caused us to waste much of our power."

"I am leaving now," said Thig. "May the Law of the Horde endure forever!" And under his breath: "on Ortha."

Thig let the life boat drop away from the other ship. Slowly it fell at first, and then faster as gravity gripped it. Fifty miles the ship must fall before it smashed into the ground. By that time the cruiser would be already beyond the orbit of the moon, and all they would see would be the moment of impact.

Friction was heating the metal skin of the ship slowly as it fell. Thig locked the controls; set the rocket relays for increasingly powerful thrusts of power, and waddled clumsily out through the lock into the frigid thin air of the stratosphere. He stepped out into emptiness.

Inside the space suit it was warm, and the air was clean. When he had fallen a few miles farther he would open the glider wings, that were built into all Orthan suits instead of parachutes, and land on Long Island. But not until he was sheltered by the clouds from the view of the space cruiser.

He was going back to Ellen and the children with the knowledge that Earth was saved from the Horde—saved by nothing more deadly than a lie!

And the part of Thig's brain that was Lewis Terry was already busying itself with the plotting of a Western novel about the handcart pioneers. . . . Once he had rescued Brazos from that Apache-ringed mesa, he would get to work on it. . . .

Wanderers OF THE Wolf Moon

By NELSON S. BOND

They were marooned on Titan, their ship wrecked, the radio smashed. Yet they had to exist, had to build a new life on a hostile world. And the man who assumed command was Gregory Malcolm, the bespectacled secretary—whose only adventures had come through the pages of a book.





Illustration by Ingels

SPARKS snapped off the switches and followed him to the door of the radio turret. Sparks was a stunted, usually-grinning, little redhead named Hannigan. But he wasn't grinning now. He laid an anxious hand on Greg's arm. "If I was you," he said, "if I was you, Malcolm, I don't think I'd say nothing to the boss about this. Not just yet, anyhow."

Greg said, "Why not?"

Sparks spluttered and fussed and made heavy weather of answering.

"Well, for one thing, it ain't important. It would only worry him. And then there's the womenfolks, they scare easy. Which of course they ain't no cause to. Atmospherics don't mean nothing. I've rode out worse storms than this—plenty of times. And in worse crates than the *Carefree*."

Greg studied him carefully from behind trim plasta-rimmed spectacles. He drew a deep breath. He said levelly, "So it's *that* bad, eh, Sparks?"

"What bad? I just told you—"

"I know. Sparks, I'm not a professional spaceman. But I've studied astrogation as few Earthlubbers have. It's been my hobby for years. And I think I know what we're up against."

"We hit a warp-eddy last night. We've been trapped in a vortex for more than eight hours. Lord only knows how many hundreds of thousands of miles we've been borne off our course. And now we've blasted into a super-ionized belt of atmospherics. Your radio signals are blanketed. You can't get signals in or out. We're a deaf-mute speck of metal being whirled headlong through space. Isn't that it?"

"I don't know what—" began Sparks hotly. Then he stopped, studied his companion thoughtfully, nodded. "O.Q.," he confessed, "that's it. But we ain't licked yet. We got three good men on the bridge. Townsend . . . Graves . . . Langhorn. They'll pull out of this if anybody can. And they ain't no sense in scaring the Old Man and his family."

"I won't tell them," said Greg. "I won't tell them unless I have to. But between you and me, what are the odds against us, Sparks?"

The radioman shrugged.

"Who knows? Vortices are unpredictable. Maybe the damn thing will toss us out on the very spot it picked us up. Maybe it will give us the old chuckeroo a million miles the other side of Pluto. Maybe it will crack us up on an asteroid or satellite. No way of telling till it happens."

"And the controls?"

"As useless," said Sparks, "as a cow in a cyclone."

"So?"

"We sit tight," said Sparks succinctly, "and hope."

Malcolm nodded quietly. He took off his spectacles, breathed on them, wiped them, replaced them. He was tall and fair; in his neat, crisply pressed business suit he appeared even slimmer than he was. But there was no nervousness in his movements. He moved measuredly. "Well," he said, "that appears to be that. I'm going up to the dining dome."

Sparks stared at him querulously.

"You're a queer duck, Malcolm. I don't think you've got a nerve in your body."

"Nerves are a luxury I can't afford," replied Greg. "If anything happens—and

if there's time to do so—let me know." He paused at the door. "Good luck," he said.

"Clear ether!" said Sparks mechanically. He stared after the other man wonderingly for a long moment, then went back to his control banks, shaking his head and muttering.

GREGORY MALCOLM climbed down the Jacob's-ladder and strode briskly through the labyrinthine corridors that were the entrails of the space yacht *Carefree*. He paused once to peer through a *perilens* set into the ship's port plates. It was a weird sight that met his gaze. Not space, ebony-black and bejewelled with a myriad flaming splotches of color; not the old, familiar constellations treading their everlasting, inexorable paths about the perimeter of Sol's tiny universe, but a shimmering webwork of light, so tortured-violet that the eyes ached to look upon it. This was the mad typhoon of space-atmospherics through which the *Carefree* was now being twisted, topsy-turvy, toward a nameless goal.

He moved on, approaching at last the quartzite-paned observation rotunda which was the dining dome of the ship.

His footsteps slowed as he composed himself to face those within. As he hesitated in the dimly-lighted passage, a trick of lights on glass mirrored to him the room beyond. He could see the others while they were as yet unaware of his presence. Their voices reached him clearly.

J. Foster Andrews, his employer and the employer of the ten thousand or more men and women who worked for Galactic Metals Corporation, dominated the head of the table. He was a plump, impatient little Napoleon. Opposite him, calm, graceful, serene, tastefully garbed and elaborately coiffured even here in deep space, three weeks from the nearest beauty shop, sat his wife, Enid.

On Andrews' right sat his sister, Maud. Not young, features plain as a mud fence, but charming despite her age and homeliness simply because of her eyes; puckish, shrewdly intelligent eyes, constantly aglint with suppressed humor at—guessed Greg—the amusing foibles and frailties of those about her.

She gave her breakfast the enthusiastic

attention of one too old and shapeless to be concerned with such folderol as calories and dietetics, pausing only from time to time to share smidgens of food with a watery-eyed scrap of white, curly fluff beside her chair. Her pet poodle, whom she called by the opprobrious title of "Cuddles."

On J. Foster's left sat his daughter, Crystal. She it was who caused Gregory Malcolm's staid, respectable heart to give a little lurch as he glimpsed her reflected vision—all gold and crimson and cream—in the glistening walls. If Crystal was her name, so, too, was crystal her loveliness.

But—Greg shook his head—but she was not for him. She was already pledged to the young man seated beside her. Ralph Breadon. He turned to murmur something to her as Greg watched; Greg saw and admired and disliked his rangy height, his sturdy, well-knit strength, the rich brownness of his skin, his hair, his eyes.

The sound of his own name startled Greg.

"Malcolm!" called the man at the head of the table. "Malcolm! Now where in blazes is he, anyhow?" he demanded of no one in particular, everyone in general. He spooned a dab of liquid gold from a Limoges preserve jar, tongued it suspiciously, frowned. "Bitter!" he complained.

"It's the very best Martian honey," said his wife.

"Drylands clover," added Crystal.

"It's still bitter," said J. Foster petulantly.

His sister sniffed. "Nonsense! It's delightful."

"I say it's bitter," repeated Andrews sulkily. And lifted his voice again. "*Malcolm!* Where are you?"

"You called me, sir?" said Malcolm, moving into the room. He nodded politely to the others. "Good morning, Mrs. Andrews . . . Miss Andrews . . . Mr. Breadon. . ."

"Oh, sit down!" snapped J. Foster. "Sit down here and stop bobbing your head like a teetotum! Had your breakfast? The honey's no good; it's bitter." He glared at his sister challengingly. "Where have you been, anyway? What kind of secretary are you? Have you been up to the radio turret? How's the market today? Is Galactic up or down?"

Malcolm said, "I don't know, sir."

"Fine! Fine!" Andrews rattled on automatically before the words registered. Then he started, his face turning red. "Eh? What's that? Don't know! What do you mean, you don't know? I pay you to—"

"There's no transmission, sir," said Greg quietly.

"No trans-nonsense! Of course there's transmission! I put a million credits into this ship. Finest space-yacht ever built. Latest equipment throughout. Sparks is drunk, that's what you mean! Well, you hop right up there and—"

MAUD ANDREWS put down her fork with a clatter. "Oh, for goodness sakes, Jonathan, shut up and give the boy time to explain! He's standing there with his mouth gaping like a rain-spout, trying to get a word in edgewise! What's the trouble, Gregory?" She turned to Greg, as Jonathan Foster Andrews wheezed into startled silence. "*That?*"

She glanced at the quartzite dome, beyond which the veil of iridescence wove and cross-wove and shimmered like a pallid aurora.

Greg nodded. "Yes, Miss Andrews."

Enid Andrews spoke languidly from the other end of the table.

"But what is it, Gregory? A local phenomenon?"

"You might call it that," said Greg, selecting his words cautiously. "It's an ionized field into which we've blasted. It—it—shouldn't stay with us long. But while it persists, our radio will be blanketed out."

Breadon's chestnut head came up suddenly, sharply.

"Ionization! That means atmosphere!"

Greg said, "Yes."

"And an atmosphere means a body in space somewhere near—" Breadon stopped, bit his lip before the appeal in Malcolm's eyes, tried to pass it off easily. "Oh, well—a change of scenery, what?"

But the moment of alarm in his voice had not passed unnoticed. Crystal Andrews spoke for all of them, her voice preternaturally quiet.

"You're hiding something, Malcolm. What is it? Is there—danger?"

But Greg didn't have to answer that question. From the doorway a harsh, defiantly strident voice answered for him.

The voice of Bert Andrews, Crystal's older brother.

"Danger? You're damn right there's danger! What's the matter with you folks—are you all deaf, dumb and blind? We've been caught in a space-vortex for hours. Now we're in the H-layer of a planet we can't even see—and in fifteen minutes or fifteen seconds we may all be smashed as flat as pancakes!"

The proclamation brought them out of their chairs. Greg's heart sank; his vain plea, "Mr. Andrews—" was lost in the medley of Crystal's sudden gasp, Enid Andrews' short, choking scream, J. Foster's bellowing roar at his only son.

"Bert—you're drunk!"

Bert weaved precariously from the doorway, laughed in his father's face.

"Sure I'm drunk! Why not? If you're smart you'll get drunk, too. The whole damn lot of you!" He flicked a derisive hand toward Greg. "You too, Boy Scout! What were you trying to do—hide the bad news from them? Well, it's no use. Everybody might as well know the worst. We're gone geesees . . . geeses . . . aw, what the hell! Dead ducks!" He fell into a chair, sprawled there laughing mirthlessly with fear riding the too-high notes of his laughter.

J. Foster turned to his secretary slowly. His ire had faded; there was only deep concern in his voice.

"Is he telling the truth, Malcolm?"

Greg said soberly, "Partly, sir. He's overstating the danger—but there *is* danger. We are caught in a space-vortex, and as Mr. Breadon realized, the presence of these ionics means we're in the Heaviside-layer of some heavenly body. But we may not crack up."

Maud Andrews glanced at him shrewdly.

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Not a thing. The officers on the bridge are doing everything possible."

"In that case," said the older woman, "we might as well finish our breakfast. Here, Cuddles! Come to momsy!" She sat down again. Greg looked at her admiringly. Ralph Breadon stroked his brown jaw. He said, "The life-skiffs?"

"A last resort," said Greg. "Sparks promised he'd let me know if it were necessary. We'll hope it's not—"

But it was a vain hope, vainly spoken in

the last, vain moment. For even as he phrased the hopeful words, came the sound of swift, racing footsteps up the corridor. Into the dining dome burst Hannigan, eyes hot with excitement. And his cry dispelled Greg's final hopes for safety.

"Everybody—the Number Four life-skiff—*quick!* We've been caught in a graveyard and we're going to crash!"

II

THOSE next hectic moments were never afterward very clear in Greg Malcolm's memory. He had a confused recollection of hearing Sparks' warning punctuated by a loud, shrill scream which he vaguely identified as emanating from Mrs. Andrews' throat . . . he was conscious of feeling, suddenly, beneath his feet the sickening, quickening lurch of a ship out of control, gripped by gravitational forces beyond its power to allay . . . he recalled his own voice dinning in his ears as, incredibly, with Sparks, he took command of the hasty flight from the dining dome down the corridor to the aft ramp, up the ramp, across girdered beams in the superstructure to the small, independently motored rocket-skiff cradled there.

He was aware, too, of strangely disconnected incidents happening around him, he being a part of them but seeming to be only a disinterested spectator to their strangeness. Of his forcing Maud Andrews toward the door of the dome . . . of her pushing back against him with all the weight of her body . . . of her irate voice, "Cuddles! I forgot him!" Then the shrill excited yapping of the poodle cradled against her as they charged on down the corridor.

J. Foster waddling beside him, tugging at his arm, panting, "The officers?" and his own unfelt assurance. "They can take care of themselves. It's a general 'bandon ship.'" Enid Andrews stumbling over the hem of a filmy peignoir . . . himself bending to lift her boldly and bodily, sweating palms feeling the warm animal heat of her excited body hot beneath them . . . Crystal Andrews stopping suddenly, crying, "Tina!" . . . and Hannigan's reply, "Your maid? I woke her. She's in the life-skiff." Bert Andrews stopping suddenly, being sick in the middle of the corridor, his drunkenness

losing itself in the thick, sure nausea of the ever-increasing unsteadiness beneath their feet.

Then the life-skiff, the clang of metal as Hannigan slammed the port behind the last of them, the fumbling for a lock-stud, the quick, grateful pant of the miniature hypos, and a weird feeling of weightlessness, rushingness, hurtlingness as his eardrums throbbed and his mouth tasted brassy and bloody with the fierce velocity of their escape.

Sense and meaning returned only when all this ended. As one waking from a nightmare dream, Greg Malcolm returned to a world he could recognize. A tiny world, encased within the walls of a forty-foot life-skiff. A world peopled too scantily. Andrews, his wife and sister, his son and daughter; Tina Laney, the maid; Breadon, Hannigan, young Tommy O'Doul, the cabin-boy (though where he had come from, or when, Greg did not know). And himself. In a life-skiff. In space.

Somewhere in space. He looked through the *perilens*. What he saw then he might better never have seen. For that shimmering pink-ochre veil had wisped away, now, and in the clean, cold, bitter-clear light of a distant sun he watched the death-dive of the yacht *Carefree*.

Like a vast silver top, spinning heedlessly, wildly, it streaked toward a mottled gray and green, brown and dun, hard and crushing-brutal terrain below. Still at its helm stood someone, for even in that last dreadful moment burst from its nose-jets a ruddy mushroom of flame that tried to, but could not, brake the dizzy fall.

For an instant Greg's eyes, stingingly blinded and wet, thought they glimpsed a wee black mote dancing from the bowels of the *Carefree*; a mote that might be another skiff like their own. But he could not be sure, and then the *Carefree* was accelerating with such violence and speed that the eye could see it only as a flaming silver lance against the ugly earth-carcase beneath, and then it struck and a carmine bud of flame burst and flowered for an instant, and that was all. . . .

And Greg Malcolm turned from the *perilens*, shaken.

Hannigan said, "It's over?" and Greg nodded.

Hannigan said, "The other skiffs? Did

they break free, or were they caught?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see for sure."

"You must have seen. Are we the only ones?"

"I couldn't see for sure. Maybe. Maybe not."

Then a body scrambled forward, pressing through the tightness of other huddled bodies, and there was a hand upon his elbow. "I'll take over now, Malcolm."

IT WAS Ralph Breadon. Gregory looked at him slowly, uncomprehendingly at first. His hand was reluctant to leave the guiding-gear of the small ship which was, now, all that remained to them of civilization and civilization's wondrous accomplishments. He had not realized until this moment that for a while . . . for a short, eager, pulse-quickenning while . . . on his alertness, in his hands, had depended the destinies of ten men and women. But he knew, suddenly and completely, that it was for this single moment his whole lifetime had waited. It was for this brief moment of command that some intuition, some instinct greater than knowledge, had prepared him. This was why he, an Earth-lubber, had studied astrogation, made a hobby of the empire of the stars. That he might be fitted to command when all others failed. And now—

And now the moment was past, and he was once again Gregory Malcolm, mild, lean, pale, bespectacled secretary to J. Foster Andrews. And the man at his side was Ralph Breadon, socialite and gentleman sportsman, trained pilot. And in Malcolm the habit of obedience was strong. . . .

"Very well, sir," he said. And he turned over the controls.

What happened then was unfortunate. It might just as well have happened to Malcolm, though afterward no one could ever say with certainty. However that was, either by carelessness or misfortune or inefficiency, once-thwarted disaster struck again at the little party on the life-skiff. At the instant Breadon's hand seized the controls the skiff jerked suddenly as though struck with a ponderous fist, its throbbing motors choked and snarled in a high, rising crescendo of torment that lost itself in supersonic heights, and the ship that had been drifting easily and under control to

the planet beneath now dipped viciously.

The misfortune was that too many huddled in the tiny space understood the operation of the life-skiff, and what must be done instantly. And that neither pilot was as yet in control of the ship. Breadon's hand leaped for the Dixie rod, so, too, did Malcolm's—and across both their bodies came the arm of Sparks Hannigan, searching the controls.

In the scramble someone's sleeve brushed the banks of control-keys. The motors, killed, souged into silence. The ship rocked into a spin. Greg cried out, his voice a strange harshness in his ears; Breadon cursed; one of the women bleated fearfully.

Then Breadon, still cursing, fought all hands from the controls but his own. And the man was not without courage. For all could see plainly, in the illumined *perilens*, how near to swift death that moment of uncertainty had led them. The skiff, which an instant before had been high in the stratosphere of this unknown planet . . . or satellite or whatever it might be . . . was now flashing toward hard ground at lightning speed.

ONLY a miracle, Greg knew, could save them now. An impulse spun his head, he looked at Crystal Andrews. There was no fear in her eyes. Just a hotness and an inexplicable anger. Beside her was the other girl, the maid, Tina; she was frankly afraid. Her teeth were clenched in her nether lip, and her eyes were wide and anxious, but she did not cry out.

Only a miracle could save them now. But Breadon's hands performed that miracle; his quick, nerveless, trained hands. A stud here . . . a lever there . . . a swift wrenching toss of the shoulders. His face twisted back over his shoulder, and his straining lips pulled taut and bloodless away from his teeth. "Hold tight, folks! We're going to bounce—"

Then they struck!

But they struck glancingly, as Breadon had hoped, and planned for, and gambled on. They struck and bounced. The frail craft shivered and groaned in metal agony, jarred across harsh soil, bounced again, settled, nosed over and rocked to a standstill. Somewhere forward something

snapped with a shrill, high *ping!* of stress; somewhere aft was the metallic flap-clanging of broken gear trailing behind them. But they were safe.

Breath, held so long that he could not remember its inhalation, escaped Greg's lungs in a long sigh. "Nice work, Mr. Breadon!" he cried. "Oh, nice work!"

But surprisingly, savagely, Breadon turned on him.

"It would have been *better* work, Malcolm, if you'd kept your damned hands off the controls! Now see what you've done? Smashed up our skiff! Our only—"

"He didn't do it!" piped the shrill voice of Tommy O'Doul. "You done it yourself, Mr. Breadon. Your sleeve. It caught the switch."

"Quiet!" Breadon, cheeks flushed, reached out smartly, stilled the youngster's defense with a swift, ungentle slap. "And you, Malcolm—after this, do as you're told, and don't try to assume responsibilities too great for you. All right, everybody. Let's get out and see how bad the damage is."

Instinctively Greg had surged a half step forward as Breadon silenced the cabin boy. Now old habit and common-sense halted him. He's overwrought, he reasoned. We're all excited and on edge. We've been to Bedlam. Our nerves are shot. In a little while we'll all be back to normal.

He said quietly, "Very well, Mr. Breadon." And he climbed from the broken skiff.

HANNIGAN said, "Looks bad, don't it?"

"Very," said Malcolm. He fingered a shard of loose metal flapping like a fin from the stern of the skiff. "Not hopeless, though. There should be an acetylene torch in the tool locker. With that—"

"You ought to of poked him," said Hannigan.

"What? Oh, you mean—?"

"Yeah. The kid was right, you know. He done it."

"His sleeve, you mean. Well, it was an accident," said Greg. "It could have happened to anyone. And he made a good landing. Considering everything. Anyhow—" Again he was Gregory Malcolm, serious-faced, efficient secretary. "Anyhow, we have been thrust into an extremely precarious circumstance. It would be silly

to take umbrage at a man's nervous anger. We must have no quarreling, no bickering—"

"Umbrage!" snorted Sparks. "Bickering! They're big words. I ain't sure I know what they mean. I ain't exactly sure they mean *anything*." He glanced at Greg oddly. "You're a queer jasper, Malcolm. Back there on the ship, I figured you for a sort of a stuffed-shirt. Yes-man to the boss. And then in the show-down, you come through like a movie hero—for a little while. Then you let that Breadon guy give you the spur without a squawk—"

Malcolm adjusted his plasta-rimmed spectacles. He said, almost stubbornly, "Our situation is grave. There must be no bickering."

"Bickering your Aunt Jenny! What do you call that?"

Sparks jerked a contemptuous thumb toward the group from which they were separated. Upon disembarking, only Greg and Sparks had moved to make a careful examination of their damaged craft. The others, more or less under the direction of Breadon, were making gestures toward removing certain necessities from the skiff. Their efforts, slight and uncertain as they were, had already embroiled them in argument.

The gist of their argument, so far as Greg Malcolm could determine, was that everyone wanted "something" to be done, but no two could agree as to just what that something was, and no one seemed to have any bursting desire to participate in actual physical labor.

J. Foster Andrews, all traces of his former panic and confusion fled, was planted firmly, Napoleonically, some few yards from the open port of the life-skiff, barking impatient orders at little Tommy O'Doul who—as Greg watched—stumbled from the port bearing a huge armload of edibles.

"Tina, the maid, was in a frenzy of motion, trying to administer to the complaints and demands of Mrs. Andrews (whose immaculate hair-do had suffered in the frenetic minutes of their flight) and Crystal Andrews (who knew perfectly well there were sweaters in the life-skiff) and Miss Maud (who wanted a can of prepared dog-food and a can-opener immediately, and

look at poor Cuddles, momsy's 'tittle pet was so hungry)!"

Bert Andrews was sulkily insisting that it was nonsense to leave the warmth and security of the skiff anyway, and he wished he had a drink, while the harassed, self-appointed commander of the refugee corps was shouting at whomever happened, at any given moment, to capture his divided and completely frantic attention. His orders were masterpieces of confusion, developing around one premise that the castaway crew should immediately set up a camp. Where, how, or with what non-existent equipment, Breadon did not venture to say.

"You see what I mean?" demanded Sparks disgustedly.

GREG MALCOLM saw. He also saw other things. That their landing-spot, while excellent for its purpose, was not by any manner of means an ideal camp-site. It was a small, flat basin of sandy soil, rimmed by shallow mountains. His gaze sought these hills, looked approvingly on their greenness, upon the multitude of dark pock-marks dotting them. These caves, were they not the habitations of potential enemies, might well become the sanctuaries of spacewrecked men.

He saw, also, a thin ribbon of silver sheering the face of the northern hills. His gaze, rising still skyward, saw other things—

He nodded. He knew, now, where they were. Or approximately. There was but one planet in the solar system which boasted such a phenomenon. The apparent distance of the Sun, judged by its diminished disc, argued his judgment to be correct. The fact that they had surged through an atmospheric belt for some length of time before finally meeting with disaster.

"Titan," he said. "Hyperion possibly. But probably Titan."

Sparks' gaze, following Greg's upward, contracted in an expression of dismay.

"Dirty cow! You mean that's where we are?"

"I believe so. There's Saturn, our mother planet, looming above us as large as a dinner plate. And the grav-drag here is almost Earth norm. Titan has a 3,000 mile diameter. That, combined with the

Saturnian tractile constant, would give us a strong pull."

Sparks wailed, "But Titan! Great morning, Malcolm, nobody ever comes to Titan! There ain't no mines here, no colonies, no—" He stopped suddenly, his eyes widening get farther. "And, hey—this place is dangerous! There are—"

"I know it," said Greg swiftly, quietly. "Shut up, Sparks. No use telling the others. If they don't guess it themselves, what they don't know won't alarm them. We've got to do something, though. Get ourselves organized into a defensive community. That's the only way—"

Ralph Bredon's sharp, dictatorial voice interrupted him. "Well, Malcolm, stop soldiering and make yourself useful!"

And J. Foster, not to have his authority usurped, supplemented the order. "Yes, Malcolm, let's get going! No time for day-dreaming, my man. We want action!"

Sparks said, "Maybe you'll get it now, fatty!" under his breath, and looked at Malcolm hopefully. But his companion merely nodded, moved forward toward the others, quietly obedient to the command.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Hannigan groaned and followed him.

III

BREADON SAID, "All right, Tommy, dump them here. I have a few words to say." He glanced about him pompously. "Now, folks, naturally we want to get away from here as soon as possible. Therefore I delegate you, Sparks, to immediately get a message off. An SOS to the nearest space cruiser."

Hannigan grinned. It was not a pleasant grin. He took his time answering. He spat thoughtfully on the ground before him, lifted his head. He said, "A message, huh?"

"That's what I said."

"And what'll I send it with?" drawled Sparks. "Tom-toms?"

Bredon flushed darkly.

"I believe the life-skiff was equipped with a radio? And theoretically you are a radio operator?"

"Finest radio money can buy!" interpolated J. Foster Andrews proudly. "Put a million credits into the *Carefree*. Best equipment throughout."

Sparks looked from one to another of them, grinned insolently. "You're both right. I *am* a radio operator, and there *was* a radio. But we crashed, remember? On account of some dope's sleeve got caught in the master switch—"

"That will do!" snapped Bredon angrily. He stared at the bandy-legged little redhead. "You mean the radio was broken?"

"It wasn't helped none. The tubes was made out of glass, and glass don't bounce so good."

Greg Malcolm said thoughtfully, "Sparks, can't you fix it?"

"Well, mebbe. But not in five minutes. Maybe not in five years. I won't know till I get going on it."

Bredon frowned.

"I'll handle this, Malcolm," he crisped. Again to the radioman, "Well, you get to work on it immediately. And as soon as you get it fixed, send out an SOS advising the patrol where we are—"

"Speaking of which," insinuated Sparks, "where are we?"

Bredon glared at him wrathfully.

"Why—why on one of the satellites of Saturn, of course. Any fool can see that!"

"O.Q. But does any fool know which one? Or shall I tell you it's Titan? And when you know that, then what? Titan wasn't named that on account of it was a pimple. It's a big place. What'll I tell the Patrol? *SOS. Stranded in the middle of we-don't-know-where, somewhere on Titan, maybe.* They'll be hunting for us till we've got whiskers down to our knees."

Bredon's irate look vanished. He looked stricken. He said, "I—I don't know. We have a compass—"

Once again it was Gregory Malcolm who entered into the conversation. He had been toying, almost absentmindedly, with a funnel taken from the skiff's stores. Into this he had poured a small portion of water; his right forefinger was pressed to the bottom of the tube, closing it. He said, "I can answer part of that question now. Enough to cut the search in half, anyway. We're in the northern hemisphere of the satellite."

Maud Andrews looked at him sharply as if noticing him for the first time in her life.

"How," she asked, "did you know that, Malcolm?"

GREG SAID, "Watch this." He released his finger at the base of the funnel gently, carefully, taking care not to shake it. The captured water swirled and trickled through the opening. Greg said, "Notice the direction in which the water whirlpools? Clockwise. On the northern hemisphere of any normally revolving heavenly body, water released from a basin, funnel, container of any sort, swirls in that direction. In the southern hemisphere it swirls counter-clockwise. Maybe you've noticed in bathtubs, or—"

Breadon said impatiently, "Never mind the speeches, Malcolm. A very clever bit of reasoning—if it's true. Do you think you can figure out our exact latitude and longitude from that?"

Greg met his gaze levelly.

"Not from that," he said, "nor from anything else. Perhaps you've forgotten that latitude and longitude are artificial inventions of man's, based in one case on an imaginary 'equator,' and in the other on an arbitrarily appointed 'line,' like Greenwich.

"But I believe I can approximate our position and state it in such a way as to cut to a minimum the time of any search that might be made for us. That is, if a space patrol ever comes close enough to get within range of Sparks' radio."

"When," said Sparks, "and if I get it fixed."

"When," said Malcolm confidently, "you get it fixed."

Breadon gave in with as good grace as he could muster.

"Well, all right," he conceded grudgingly. "We'll let that rest for now. Meanwhile, it is apparent that we can't escape Titan—or wherever we are—immediately. That being the case, our first task will be to set up a camp. This is as good a spot as any. We'll stay right here by the ship. We'll use the ship to sleep in at nights—"

Greg coughed apologetically. "Mr. Breadon—"

"Well, what now? More funnels, Malcolm?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir—I don't believe it wise to make camp here. Nor to use the skiff for sleeping purposes."

"And why not, my man?" That was J. Foster.

"The conservation of what little fuel and power, we have, for one thing," said Greg. "Mr. Breadon's idea of using the skiff to sleep in was undoubtedly based on the plan of using the heating units. That we must not do. The time may come when we will need the skiff again, badly. We must save its fuel and electro-motors.

"And as for making camp here beside the ship—"

He hesitated. Crystal Andrews, her voice a trifle edged, as had been that of her father, prodded him for reply.

"Well?" she demanded. "Go on, Malcolm!"

"It wouldn't be safe, Miss. This is an exposed and vulnerable spot. Titan has—dangerous denizens." The words came reluctantly. "It would be much safer to take refuge in the hills. In one of those caves up there."

Crystal gasped, "Caves! Us—living in a cave! Ridiculous!" J. Foster echoed her words vehemently. Breadon laughed curtly; Mrs. Andrews made a gesture of repugnance with a slim, pale, exquisitely manicured hand. Bert Andrews snorted. Of the tycoon's family, only Maud Andrews showed any inclination to heed the secretary's suggestion. Her old eyes glinted shrewdly; her head made the ghost of a pleased nod.

BUT OTHERS more openly approved his plan. The maid, Tina, watching Malcolm with curious attentiveness, nodded and said, "That is wise. I have heard tales about Titan and its—its denizens." Tommy O'Doul grinned delightedly. He said, "Caves! Boy, caves! Old-time stuff, huh, Greg?" And Sparks Hannigan had said, "That's right, folks! And it's past noon now. Might as well get going right away so's we can get settled before dark. Right, Greg?"

And yet again there was the counterplay, the balance of Breadon's wealth, Breadon's name and Breadon's accustomed authority to the calm, sane logic of the slim young secretary. Breadon's curt laugh changed to something definitely antagonistic; his words sheered the muttering like a keen blade.

"Very interesting, Malcolm! But wholly impractical and completely absurd. We will remain here. And now—" He

glanced at the high-riding sun. "And now I think we should eat before setting up our camp. Tommy, Hannigan—bring the electro-stove from the skiff. 'Tina, prepare lunch. We'll pursue a more intelligent discussion of our situation on full stomachs. Malcolm, bring cases from the skiff. We'll build a rough table out here in the open."

He scowled impatiently, authoritatively about the strangely silent group.

IV

AT THAT MOMENT Gregory Malcolm realized what he must do. It was not a pleasant realization. Greg Malcolm was an easy-going, a peaceful, a placid man. The secretarial type. Sparks had called him a—what was it?—a "stuffed shirt." Never, save in rare moments of dreamful imagining, had Greg ventured to impress his opinions, his will, upon the desires of fellow men.

But he, of all those now surrounding him, seemed to understand, fully and completely, the crisis which now faced their refugee group. And he—it was made apparent to him by the pompousness of Foster Andrews, by the mulish petulance of Bert Andrews, by the aloof hauteur of Crystal and Mrs. Andrews, by the suicidal "orders" just given by Ralph Breadon—he alone was, in this moment of need, capable of deciding the destinies of the Earth-exiles.

J. Foster Andrews had the acumen and common-sense to lead them—but he had not the requisite knowledge. Breadon had the training, the space-experience—but he lacked solid horse-sense, and his decisions were too strongly flavored by his own savor of self-importance. Yet if they, ten humans, were to exist for a week . . . a month . . . a year . . . until help reached them, someone must command. And he, Gregory Malcolm, was the only one capable of taking into his hands the reins of rulership.

It was a knowledge at once heady, intoxicating and frightening. But—there it was! It had to be faced. And Greg moved, grimly but methodically, to the accomplishment of that which he deemed necessary. He halted the radioman with a gesture.

"Wait a minute, Sparks! Tommy, wait!

"Tina!" And he faced Breadon firmly. "We are not going to do that, Mr. Breadon," he said. "It would not be wise. We are not going to do it."

Breadon's brown features darkened with swift anger.

"What? What's this?"

And J. Foster Andrews waddled forward, puffing irate astonishment. "Here, here, Malcolm! What do you mean? This is—hrrumph!—blasted impertinence, sir! Insubordination!"

Malcolm held his ground, his pale cheeks oddly flushed.

"We are not going to do these things," he repeated slowly, definitely. "Breadon—" It did not occur to him that unconsciously he had abandoned the respectful, formal "Mr." which heretofore he had never omitted. "Breadon, your orders clearly indicate that you have not in any way grasped the full implications of our plight.

"I have already warned that we should not make needless use of our limited fuel and power reserves. Yet you've told Tommy to bring the electro-stove. I have hinted that there are dangerous antagonists on Titan, yet you wish boldly to tempt attack by cooking and eating here on this exposed plain in broad daylight. Common sense should advise you of the folly of eating what few food stores we hold in reserve, yet you calmly command the preparation of a full and wasteful meal."

He did not make mention of the other, perhaps irrelevant but nonetheless rankling detail. That never once had Breadon offered to help in these doings, nor had any member of the Andrews clan volunteered to assist; that the physical labor had arbitrarily been assigned to those of lesser caste—himself, Hannigan, young Tommy, 'Tina.

"Therefore," he continued doggedly, "I, for one, am refusing to obey your orders. I do so because I must. Call it 'insubordination' if you wish, Andrews—" The older man spluttered incoherently, mauve-jowled. "—but I would call it the 'will-to-exist.' The law of survival. I mean to survive on this unknown, hostile planet. That can't be done if we squander resources as Breadon apparently means to."

A MOMENT of tight silence answered his outburst. A slow, awkward movement stirred through the little group. It was, Greg sensed, a movement of alignment. He could sense, rather than see, the unconscious coalition of his sympathizers behind him; could see, without sensing, the outraged drawing-together of the Andrews husband and wife, *fille* and *fil*, beside Breadon. One there was whose bright, intent eyes were clouded with uncertainty. Maud Andrews. Then, as if irresistibly drawn by the bonds of blood, she too looked to Breadon as her spokesman.

Breadon's voice was a thick flame of wrath.

"So that's the way it is, eh, Malcolm! Well, this had to come sooner or later. Might as well have it over with right now. Get the glasses off, my pale young friend! One leader is all we'll have around here!"

He stepped forward, bigger, browner, heavier than Malcolm. There was a rustle behind Greg; Sparks had stepped to his side, was pressing something into his hand.

"This'll make him behave, Greg."

"Put it away!" said Greg coldly. "We'll have better use for firearms later on. I'll handle this the way Breadon wants." Slowly, painstakingly, he removed his plasta-rimmed glasses, slipped them in a lucite case, slid the case into a pocket, removed his trimly cut double-breasted business coat, handed it to the grumbling little redhead.

"But look—" growled Sparks. Then stopped. There was a newness about Greg Malcolm that stopped him. With the goggles removed, he thought dimly, Malcolm's eyes looked different. Less soft and meeky-mosey. They were like—sort of like chunks of grey flint. And Greg wasn't as skinny as he had looked, now that you saw him with his coat off. He was lean, yes—but there was a greyhound whippetness to his leanness; a tight, spring-coiled sort of strength.

"Well?" said Greg. "You're ready, Breadon?"

Breadon's answer was a sudden, rushing charge. One of the women gasped; there came the whipping splat of flesh striking flesh, then all noises muted save the sound of two men meeting in face-to-

face conflict. Breadon's left jarred Greg back, his right swung wide and hard to put a swift end to the dispute—

But found no target. For leanly, deftly, with pantherlike swiftness, Greg was out from under the blow; his own left, probing sharply, flicked once . . . twice . . . again into his antagonist's face, jarring Breadon, shocking, stunning him, halting his bull-like rush and jolting him back on his heels.

Maddened, Breadon whirled, seeking this will-o-the-wisp whose jabbing lefts stung like salt in an open wound. He growled something that was never completed, for knuckles bruised the word against his lips. Blood sprang, saline and hot in his mouth; the taste of it edged his rage to inchoate blindness, he flailed out recklessly, forgetful of anything he had previously known about fighting.

And that was his undoing. Against his bulky charge, Greg could do nothing but fight the kind of fleeting defensive battle he had learned in long hours at the gymnasium. A maddened warrior like this was a different matter, though; he was a vulnerable fighter.

Calmly and with infinite assurance, Greg stepped inside Breadon's swinging arms, beneath his faulty guard. His right hand came up once, sharply, to Breadon's jaw. The big man spluttered pink spray, lifted his arms. Again Greg lashed out with his left, this time to the belly; Breadon gasped and his mouth remained open, sagging.

Like the whipping length of a python, Malcolm threw that lean, deadly-sure right again—this time squarely to the other man's jaw at the spot where jawbone meets the ear. The blow cracked in the dull, astonished silence like the chunk of a heart-biting axe on timber. Breadon straightened slowly, numbly, in a meaningless reflex. The fire went out of his eyes; their brownness dulled like sun-faded velvet. Then he fell. As a tall building might fall. Crumpling . . . the knees folding first, the body sagging, the shoulders, the head helpless and rolling. In sections. He rolled once and lay still.

Sparks Hannigan said, "Gawddle-mighty!" His voice was feeble, awestruck.

Greg Malcolm's fists, falling to his sides, uncoiled reluctantly. As if they had gripped the fiery baton of his anger, the

battle-urge slipped from him with their unclenching. He drew a deep breath to steady his ragged breathing, nodded to the wide-eyed Tina.

"Take care of him," he said. "Water. He'll be all right in a minute." He faced the others, his manner an odd mixture of apology and aggressiveness. "Breadon said there could be but one in command," he said. "Let us hope that is definitely settled. For all time. And now I will ask all of you to help. Our first step will be to strip the skiff of the equipment we may need and carry it into the hills. In one of those caves we will make our headquarters."

But the fight was to have its aftermath. Crystal Andrews it was who burst from the little knot before him to kneel at her fiancé's side, taking Breadon's head in her arms, glaring rage and hot defiance at Greg.

"With you?" she cried. "With you, you—cheap, upstart bully? Not in a million years! Ralph—Ralph, dear, are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

She jerked the water-soaked handkerchief from the maid's hands, pressed its coolness to Breadon's sand-bruised forehead. Breadon's eyes opened, dazed at first, then full of awareness, sultry, indignant, incredulous. He moved to get on his feet again. Greg stared at him coldly.

"Get up if you want to, Breadon. But don't get up fighting!"

Hannigan chuckled. "He ain't hurt much. Just his conceit. It's punched full of right and left hand wallops."

"That will do, Sparks!" snapped Greg. He looked at the others, replacing his glasses carefully, a vague sorrow in his eyes, defeat in his voice despite his victory. "You all feel that way? You still refuse—?"

Crystal Andrews' cried out, "Talk! Talk! Will you stop talking and go? Go to the hills if you want to. Leave us in peace. We don't want you and don't need you. Go to the hills—and good riddance to you!"

The tiny gimlet of hurt that lay somewhere deep inside of Greg twisted once more at her words, snapped, became suddenly cold and bitter. His jaw set. He nodded to Sparks.

"Very well. If that's your desire.

Sparks, there are four of us, six of them. Take an inventory of all equipment and supplies in the skiff. We will take exactly four-tenths of everything . . . fuel, power units, food, water . . . everything. Get going. I'll help you directly."

Sparks said, "The radio?"

"We'll take that. You're the only one capable of repairing it. We'll save them in spite of themselves. If we can."

Sparks said, "Aye, sir! Come on, Tommy. Tina." He started toward the crashed skiff. Greg hesitated, feeling the desire to say something, to make one final plea, not knowing what to say or how to say it, restrained by the yet cold anger etched on his heart by Crystal's scorn. Then he too turned to help. A strident voice halted him.

"Just a moment, young man!"

"Yes, Miss Andrews?"

Maud Andrews, Cuddles firmly cradled to her ample bosom, left her brother's side and marched toward the life-skiff.

"Tell Sparks to make that a fifty-fifty division," she said. "There will be five of us in the hills."

ENID ANDREWS bleated faintly. Crystal, still kneeling, stared at her aunt incredulously. J. Foster Andrews vented his indignation in a sudden, blustering roar. "Maud! Don't be a blasted idiot! Come back here this minute!"

Maud Andrews continued to surge inexorably forward.

"I'm not," she grunted, "being an idiot! It's you who are, my dear, fat, dimwitted brother! I'm a selfish, pampered old fool, but I know common-sense when I hear it, and I know a man when I see one. Furthermore, silly as you may think it, I have a ridiculous desire to keep on living. I may have to *work* to do that, and I'm not overly fond of work, but if Mr. Malcolm will have me—?"

"Just plain 'Malcolm,' Miss Andrews," said Greg gravely, gratefully. "And I'm happy you see it my way."

"Tut! I'm not doing you a favor, Malcolm! I'm just looking out for myself, as I always do. Well, Sparks, don't stand there yawping like my thick-pated brother! What can I do to help?"

She waddled away. Greg glanced hopefully at those still waiting, immobile.

"Won't you—" he began, "Won't the rest of you—"

The eyes that met his were glacial. Bert Andrews, thick-lipped and bridling, snarled disdain. "The hell with you, Malcolm! The sooner you get out of here, the better!"

Greg said, "We'll let you know where to find us. If you should—should need us, just call."

"We won't need you." That was Crystal, coldly.

"I hope you won't," said Greg. "I sincerely hope you won't. . ."

V

SPARKS HANNIGAN came out grinning. He said, "This one looks like the business, Greg. Plenty of room. Dry and warm. It's even got a natural flue-vent so's we can have a fireplace inside."

Greg nodded, pleased.

"Sounds good. I was beginning to think we'd never find a suitable cave. This one's within easy reach of that spring, too; that solves the fresh water problem. Well, we might as well get settled. Getting toward evening."

"Tina glanced at the sky, surprised. "So soon? I didn't know it had taken us so long. It seems as if only a few hours ago it was noon."

"It was," grinned Greg. "Titan's days are shorter than Earth's. Its diameter is only about 3,000 miles. By Earth measurements you'd say Titan had a sixteen hour day."

"And the 'day,'" grumbled Sparks, "ain't none too bright at that. On account of we're so far from the Sun."

"You haven't seen the worst of it. Right now we're on the Sun side of Saturn. We revolve about our primary once every 500-odd hours. Since Saturn is so large, when we are to the lee of it, it eclipses us entirely. So for about five days every Titan 'month' we suffer a complete blackout."

"And that—" Greg sobered. "That is another reason the others should dig into a good warm cave. It gets plenty cold during that eclipse period. An open camp on an exposed plain—" He shook his head.

Maud Andrews said, "I can't understand why this satellite is habitable at all.

I was under the impression that Saturn is a frozen planet."

"It is. Its surface temperature is approximately 300° below zero, Fahrenheit. But the warmth of its numerous satellites is one of the astonishing discoveries made by the early space explorers, fifty or sixty years ago. Scientists have not yet explained the matter satisfactorily. Some say the tremendous mass of Saturn, the waves of atmospherics set up by its swirling motion and the 'grindstone' of its ring, form an electronic barrier-shield for the satellites. Still others believe that frigid Saturn acts as a gigantic mirror or solar reflector for its children."

"But Greg—" That was Tommy O'Doul. "Why ain't there any colonies here if the climate's O.K.? Men live on Venus, where it's hot as billy-be-hanged, and on Uranus, which is nothing but a ball of ice, and on a bunch of cold, airless asteroids—"

"Economics, Tommy. The simple, single dictator of mankind's every venture. Venus has valuable vegetation, Uranus and the asteroids have important metals that can't be duplicated in Earth's laboratories, the asteroids have rare ore deposits. There is not—or at least there has not as yet been discovered—anything native to Titan that cannot be mined or made elsewhere more cheaply, more easily. Some day man's ever-expanding frontiers will claim this satellite as a colony, too. But now that the entire universe is open to man, the human race can increase a millionfold and still allow every soul more *lebensraum* than he can possibly use."

Sparks Hannigan gazed at him admiringly.

"It's stoo-pondous!" he said.

"Titan? Not any more so than—"

"Not Titan. You. You know everything, don't you? Pal—" Sparks shook his head. "I sure had you figured wrong. I thought you was a soft-soaping dope. So then you got us off the *Carefree* onto the skiff, cooled Breaddon like a herring, declared yourself *It* and made us like it—"

Greg said, "Nonsense! I just happened to—Oh, nonsense! Shall we go into our new home?" But he flushed.

By evening—Titan's short, grey shadowed evening, the only logical unit of duration by which they could live so

long as they remained captive here—their new cave home began to take on some semblance of lived-inness.

Vegetation was abundant on the hillsides. Sparks and Tommy had gathered heaps of dry faggots while Greg built a crude stone fire place underneath the flue-vent Sparks had reported; shortly thereafter the women had a cheerful blaze crackling on the hearth, and mingled with its grateful warmth was the odor of a savory stew, welcome scent to the nostrils of five who had worked long and hard in gathering the vegetables that had gone into that potage.

"Eat nothing," Greg had warned, "dig nothing that does not show signs of having been eaten, dug or picked by wild animals. Later we can make chemical analysis of dubious foods to determine their edibility. For the present we will depend on the most certain test, the acceptance by other flesh-and-blood creatures."

He had also permitted that a single can of bouillon concentrate be used in the stew. "For flavoring. There is so little food in reserve that we must save it against the cold, dark days when we can't get out to gather supplies. Later on we'll have fresh meat."

He looked thoughtfully at Cuddles, sniffing, yapping excitedly by the fireplace, and Maud Andrews, with a swift, maternal gesture, swept the poodle into her arms and glared at him belligerently.

"Oh, no you don't! You'll eat *me* first!"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Greg indignantly. "I had something else in mind. A poodle, eh? Hmmm!"

"Tina and young Tommy came into the cave, arms full of fresh and fragrant ferns which they dumped beside a wall. Greg, glancing at them, could not curb his astonishment at the overwhelmingly sudden change that had come over Tina. During the *Carefree's* cruise, during the years he had worked for old J. Foster, he had seen the girl a thousand times—but never, he discovered now, really *seen* her before! Always she had been a dim, dusty figure in the background. A foil for the spoiled, immaculate perfection of Enid Andrews, the glittering, heart-stopping beauty of Crystal.

Now, viewed as a woman and a com-

rade, he was aware that *she* was lovely herself. Slim as a rush, and yielding-strong as that same wild water-flower; dark-eyed; hair as the Martian midnight with live lights glinting in it, too, as the stars glinted over the Martian deserts; soft, white hands, graceful but capable—

But here! he thought, what nonsense was this? He had work to do. And this was no time for weaving poetic cadences about a girl who was practically a total stranger!

Now she laughed, gaily, her very laughter seeming to burst from a heart happy with newfound freedom. And she said, "It was just as you said, Greg. We found the ferns down by the spring. Did we bring enough of them?"

Greg said, "Enough for tonight. They'll make comfortable beds. Later on Sparks and I will build real beds for all of us. Thank goodness there was a tool-chest on the skiff. You folks ready to eat?"

Hannigan lifted his nose from the fireplace.

"Ready! I been ready for a half hour, and my stummick's been ready for a week!"

And somehow it didn't seem at all surprising to Greg that Maud Andrews should be the one who, sleeves rolled up, face flushed with hearth-heat, warmth and good fellowship, seized the ladle, beat on the side of the pot vigorously and bawled, in what was far from a wealthy socialite's cultured tone, "Come and get it! Come and get it!"

SO, SOMEHOW, the first day was over . . . and the second day, too . . . and a week of Titan's sixteen hour days slid past so quickly that Greg could not truly say where they had disappeared.

Duties, chores, at first chaotic became matters of mere routine as one or another of the little band took them on his own shoulders. Maud Andrews, who on the second day bluntly and surprisingly startled everyone with the pronouncement that henceforth there would be, "—no more of this 'Miss Andrews' stuff; call me 'Aunt Maud'; I'm old enough to have mothered every last one of you!", set herself up as cook, thus freeing Tina to take care of the multitude of other household—

or cave-hold—duties. And an excellent cook she turned out to be, performing miracles with the odd, variegated samples of produce brought to her by the rest of the group.

Her once-aroused suspicion flared again when Greg casually requested, one day, permission to take Cuddles for a little run in the woods. She clucked to her pet, turned him over to Greg, but watchfully.

"I don't know what you have in mind, Greg Malcolm. But if you come back here with any sinister looking pieces of meat and no Cuddles—"

"I'm hoping to come back," confessed Greg, "with both meat *and* Cuddles. He's a poodle, isn't he? Well, he's always been a lap-dog to you, but I have an idea maybe his heritage will overcome his habits when I get him out into the woods. The poodle, in its earliest beginnings, used to be a hunting dog, you know. It was bred and trained especially for that purpose. Of course his nose may have been ruined by being pampered, but—"

"My Cuddles," exclaimed Aunt Maud, "a hunting dog!" She looked horrified.

Greg said slyly, "I hope so. He wouldn't be the first member of this party to prove his true worth beneath a thin veneer of civilization."

Aunt Maud's cheeks were red, but it might have been the warmth of the fire. And maybe the wood-smoke made her eyes shine like that, too. She pushed Greg roughly.

"Oh, run along!" she ordered. "But mind you bring him back unchanged!"

"Okay, Auntie," Greg said.

Greg brought him back, but not unchanged. For the poodle had, amazingly, reverted to type, once set on the trail of wild game. Greg carried back to the dinner table two small creatures, one vaguely resembling a squirrel, one definitely allied to the rabbit family, plunked them proudly before his companions.

"Don't give me credit. It was the purp. He's a humdinger. You should have seen him tree that squirrel—or whatever it is! And that rabbit-thing—he went scrambling halfway down a warren after it! Didn't you, Slewoffoot?"

The dog yeped happily. Aunt Maud moaned.

"Slewoffoot! Oh, my gracious! Cuddles, come here to momsy-womsy wight away! Did nassy-mans call him—"

Cuddles made no move to obey. Greg whistled, and the dog looked up. "Okay, Slewoffoot. Go to momma!" And the dog pranced over to Aunt Maud. Greg grinned. "I think he likes his new name better," he said.

Slewoffoot yeped again in an ecstasy of approval.

AND SO, gradually, life became easier and smoother and happier for the quintet of cave-dwellers. Beds took the place of piled ferns, the woodpile towered toward the cove roof against the days of dark and cold which, according to Greg's computations, might be expected within the next week or so, food was varied and plentiful, and a needed food was supplied when Tommy O'Doul marched triumphantly home with a bawling kid in his arms.

Sparks glared at him.

"Hey, youngster, what did you tote that home for? We ain't got no room for pets. And that thing ain't ripe to be et yet."

Tommy said, "I had to bring it. It was the only way I could make its mom follow me. See?"

And sure enough, a few yards away, anxiously eying its captive offspring, was a mother goat. Or something like a goat, anyway. Sparks caught on them. A flying tackle and the camp had corraled its first head of livestock. And from then on there was milk.

And there were songs in the evening, and card games and stories and compensations for the long, hard tasks of the daytime. Sparks labored on his radio set, though without too much hope. "Smashed to hell and gone, Greg. The tubes is the wust part. I could jockey the wires around. But glass—"

Greg looked thoughtful. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder? Well—do what you can with the metallic parts."

So they waited and worked, and in some dim corner of their minds continued to hope for the release which all in some vague fashion expected might come "some day." And their camaraderie was great and wholesome, but there was a single subject they never mentioned. The other quintet on the plain below. From their

hillside eyrie they could see the other camp, but by common consent they made no effort to approach Breadon's followers. They had offered assistance and it had been refused. They could do nothing more, now, unless—

The unless came sooner than they expected. In the still of the night it came in the dark, multi-mooned Saturnian night, when Greg and his comrades were all asleep in their bunks.

Greg woke with a strained feeling that he could not at first identify. He only knew, as a newly awakened sleeper dimly knows, that something was amiss.

Then, as he listened, he heard it again. The sound of a firing rifle. And the thin, muted whisper of a cry from the clearing below. A voice lifted in dismay.

With a start he was on his feet.

"Sparks!"

Hannigan bounced from his blankets like a redheaded ball of rubber. He was on his feet, scrubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands, even before he knew he was awake.

"Smatta? Whuzzup, Greg? Smatta?"

"Below!" roared Greg. "The party in the valley—they're in trouble of some kind! Get your gun and come on!"

• VI

THE OTHERS were awake now. Young Tommy was aquake with excitement. He made a headlong dash for the dry niche wherein were stored the arms of the cavedwellers, came back dragging three rifles, handed one to Greg and another to Hannigan.

"Let's get going, Greg!" he yelped. "Golly Moses, what do you think it is? Animals, maybe? Or people? Gosh, let's get going!"

Greg took the spare rifle from him firmly.

"We'll go; you stay." Then, in swift contrition as the lad's face fell measurable inches. "Someone must guard the cave while we're gone, Tommy. Tina, build up the fire and put a kettle on. Aunt Maud—"

The old woman nodded grimly.

"I know. We'll have hot water ready. And bandages if you need 'em. Run along!"

How they ever got down that mountain-side so quickly was ever afterward a mystery to Greg. It was not exactly a painless descent; their progress was a series of runs, falls and buttock-bruising slides. The footing, in broad daylight, was precarious at best; with only sallow Saturn and the aura of the Rings to illumine their way, it is a wonder they ever reached the plain whole, in a single piece.

To add to their frenetic haste, in their ears there rang the constant challenge of gunfire. Crimson flashes lit the flatsward below, once a whining slug, miserably aimed, made both of them duck instinctively as it shrilled somewhere over their heads, *spanged!* against a rock behind them, went ricocheting off into the darkness.

For now they were on level ground, and mingled with the rattle of arms there was another sound, the purling whimper of tongueless, inhuman things astir and hungry. Greg had once heard, on Earth, the furtive night-passage of a jackal tribe; the soft, half plaintive mewlings, the incessant scrape of scrabbling paws, the ammoniac stench of unwashed bodies. He thought of this now, sharply, as he heard these mutterings, smelled these rank odors, strained his eyes to determine contours in the darkling night.

Hannigan complained, "You see 'em, Greg? It's dark as a whale's gut. I can't see nothing. What'll we fire at? Are our folks out in the open or in the skiff? We might hit *them* if—"

Greg said, "We'll know in a minute." As they moved forward he tugged from his belt the weapon he had been holding in reserve; the one such weapon found amongst the stores of the life-skiff; one he dared use but infrequently because once its charge was exhausted he had no way of replenishing it. "We should be near enough now. Spot 'em quick and fire while there's light!"

He jerked the trigger of the Haemholst flame pistol. A writhing streamer of ochre speared from its muzzle, lighting the plain with a hot and eerie effulgence. Like a fiery dart it blazed into the heart of the pack surrounding the life-skiff. By its lingering gleam Greg saw, with stomach-churning repulsion, the creatures which attacked.

Neither men nor wolves were they, but

a cruel parody on each. Lean, hair-matted beast-things running on four legs, semi-human of feature but with loose lips snarling back from yellow fangs; fingered paws long-clawed; indescribably evil and filthy; the more inhuman because they embodied so many physical attributes of Man.

Their pack must have numbered three score, ranging from gray-pelted old ones to skinny, ragged pups. Apparently they had surprised the plateau party in the open, allowing them no time to remove their precious campstuffs, because the ground about, around and before the skiff was littered with a refuse of clothing, blankets, supplies and equipment, cases and scraps of food.

It was for this last that the wolf-men had attacked, because even as the ochre beam found their midst, they were scrambling hungrily about the campsite, avidly gobbling all edible scraps they could nose out. A few more aggressive ones scented richer victuals; these it was who, despite the sporadic fire from within the skiff, snuffled, clawed and clamored at the port.

UNTIL the heat-beam struck them. That put an end to their hunger and their blood-lust. Like any wild woodland animal, they had no fear of firearms; they had no experience with them. Bullets that struck, killed; wolf-men untouched by bullets had no way of associating hurt with a sharp burst of sound and a strange, unfamiliar powder-scent.

But light—light that burned the hair and scorched the flesh; light that spared not one of them, but spread to dose all with its heatful pain—that was something different! As the beam struck and spread, snuffings changed to bestial screams of fear and pain. Those nearest the beam's focal point felt no pain; they died instantly, charred hulks that crisped and sank, shapeless, to the ground. And from these strangely altered, swiftly dead companions the others fled, howling in shrill alarm. Their footsteps were the dry patter of leaves on shale; they broke and ran wildly for the nether hills, tonguing shrill ululations of hurt.

Then the door of the skiff opened cautiously; dim light was a sliver, a crack, an oblong. And the voice of J. Foster Andrews quavered through the darkness to

their ears. It sounded shrill and afraid.

"Malcolm—is that you?"

Sparks snorted derisively. "Ain't that awful?" he demanded. "Is that you!" He raised his voice. "Hell, no, it ain't him! It's the Gray Lensman. Who'd you think?"

"Shut up, Sparks!" Greg said, "Hold your fire, the wolf-things are gone. We're coming in!"

A few moments later, he and Hannigan were standing within the life-skiff.

GREGORY MALCOLM was twenty-six years old. For more than eight years he had been training himself to undergo any and all emotions without change of expression. That was, in his opinion, a prime requisite for a man whose vocation lay in a subordinate position. Now he was grateful for learning that self-control, and hoped his features were as granitelike as he tried to make them. He hoped his eyes did not mirror the astonishment, the shock, the numb dismay he felt when he first glanced about the interior of that cabin, and at those who stood before him.

It was incredible that in one short week—one very short Titanian week—so great a change could have been wrought in this haughty quintet. His followers were weathering the storm of catastrophe without faltering, without any relaxation of civilized standards. But Breadon's—

He studied them, his quietude concealing the sudden heartsickness he knew, his spectacles hiding the swift light of horror in his eyes. The men had not shaved, it was clear, since their crash-landing. Five day stubble lay frostily on the jowls of J. Foster Andrews, blackly on the cheeks of his son and son-in-law to-be.

Nor did slovenliness end there. Beneath the beard-growth, the skin of the men looked dirty, dingy, sallow, as if they had not washed for days. Their clothes were equally soiled and sorry. Greg saw that J. Foster's nails were dull and broken and grubby as the nails of a stevedore.

He rallied himself with an effort. These were men. They had been working hard, laboring. They could not stay immaculate. They had been in a fight.

Then he looked at the women, and knew that he made excuses vainly. It was even more disillusioning to see what had hap-

pened to Mrs. Andrews and Crystal in so short a time.

Enid Andrews, fashion-plate of two continents, one of Earth's smartest-dressed women, thrice-named by fashion authorities as Best Dressed Woman in the Solar Confederation, hobbled sloppily about on scuffed slippers, the heel of one of which had broken off and not been replaced, so that her posture sagged like a bag of meal, split at a side-seam and sifting awkwardly away. Her once elaborate coiffure was a bird's-nest of tangled braids which hung unbraided, curls that sagged limply; hastily adjusted pins and combs clung insecurely to locks that, once pearl-silver, were now clay-crustured gray.

Crystal—glamorous, pulse-stirring Crystal—was in no better plight. Her gorgeous ash-gold hair was pulled severely back from a forehead which, Greg discovered, was not nearly so broad and smooth and high as he had imagined; the artificial color had rubbed from her cheeks, leaving them lustreless and sullen; her lips—ever rich, ripe, full—were pale and harsh-thin and her mouth had tight, argumentative lines at the corners. Her eyes were dark-rimmed, weary, haggard. She was, thought Greg with shocked comprehension, a tired girl.

They were all tired. Tired and beaten and dejected. All but Breadon who, even now, was eyeing Greg defiantly, as if challenging him to comment on their condition. He said, bitterly, "Thank you, Malcolm. It was a most magnanimous gesture, coming down from your hilltop castle to rescue us."

GREG said nothing. He was looking about the interior of the cabin, noticing with incredulous disfavor the way it had been abused, littered, left uncleaned. Ashes, dirty dishes, scraps of cloth and paper, fragments of cartons and dirt tracked in from outside. . .

But Hannigan was not bound by Greg's compunctions. He spoke his mind frankly, staring at the five skiff-dwellers with obvious contempt in his eyes.

"If you'd ask me," he said, "it's damn near time somebody come down and rescued you. Not from wolves, neither. From yourselves. You all look like you'd been drug through the butt end of a wringer."

"Well, we have," began Bert Andrews savagely. "We have been through—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Breadon cut short his plaint viciously; blustered defiance that was in itself an apology. "We've been busy making a camp around here. We haven't had time to—"

Sparks drawled, "Bud, we been busy making a camp, too, in a place which wasn't already equipped with furnishings, like your'n. And I think we done a better job of it. And in between times, we found time to shave and bathe once in a while."

Andrews flushed and said stiffly, "There is a need of being provident with water. Our supply is limited—"

Greg said, "What? You mean you've been using the water reserve from the life-skiff?"

Enid Andrews answered. Excitedly. Volubly. Almost at the point of tears. She wrung her hands, and Greg could not help noticing the anomaly of those at once dirty and gem-bedecked fingers.

"We have. Oh, we have. There's no other water anywhere around here. Nor food. We've been living on concentrates . . . sickening, horrible stuff. . ."

"That's not true!" flamed Breadon. "We did have other food. I made bread. I caught small game. I put out traps. There would have been plenty of food except for the wolf-men who raided tonight. They broke our stove . . . stole my reserves. . ."

"Which," mocked Sparks, "you conveniently left out for them to sniff and come a-running after? Why don't you call it a day, Breadon? Admit you're nothing but a cocky Earthlubber at heart and—"

"Why, you little whippersnapper!" Breadon took a swift step forward. But Greg had heard enough. He laid a restraining hand on the socialite's arm. His voice was as soothing, as pleading, as he could make it.

"Haven't we had enough of that already? Look here, Breadon, let's let bygones be bygones. We've had our little quarrel, now let's act like sane and sensible humans.

"You're not situated here any too well. You've admitted you're not near a water supply. The terrain is open to attack, as is proven by tonight's incident. You've been, well—let's say 'unlucky.'"

"On the other hand—we've been lucky.

We've got a nice, warm cave large enough to house all ten of us easily. We have soft beds and good food and fresh milk; safety and good fellowship. With some of the things you have in here—those upholstered chairs, for instance; what remains of your equipment and supplies, we could make a veritable paradise of our cave.

"So what do you say? Let's cast in our lots together. Make it one big, happy family?"

J. FOSTER looked at him thoughtfully. Enid Andrews began to cry softly. Crystal glanced at Ralph, then at Greg, than at Breadon again. Bert Andrews stroked his chin. He said, "It sounds good—"

Breadon interrupted.

"There's just one thing, Malcolm," he said curtly. "We'll accept you—your overtures of friendship on one condition. That you'll step down from the high horse you've been riding lately, come to the realization that you're not cock-o'-the-walk around these parts."

Greg said gravely, "If you mean that our community shall be a society in which all share and share alike, I am in complete agreement with you."

"That's what I mean," said Breadon. "Of course, we all recognize that there must be leadership. As our oldest man, our most important member, Mr. Andrews is that logical leader. I can assure you, acting as his lieutenant—"

"No!" said Sparks loudly. "It's the same old thing in a different package, Greg. He wants to be boss, else he won't play. The answer is—comets to you, Breadon. We're doing all right the way we are; you're making a mess of your affairs. As far as I'm concerned, you can stay here and stew in your own gravy!"

He turned toward the door. Greg said, "Wait, Sparks. I'll be right with you." And he, too, nodded at Breadon. "I fear Sparks is right, Breadon. You haven't learned your lesson yet. We're going back where we belong. We're glad to have been of some small service to you. If you ever need us again, just call. Meanwhile, my offer remains open. If you should ever decide to join us on *our* terms—"

A loud and cheerful voice interrupted him. A voice from outside, bellowing gay

greeting, "Ahoy, you in there! Open the door!"

Sparks said, "Aunt Maud! What's she —?" and pulled the door open. In the oblong, against the slow gray dawn now crawling above the hilltops, stood Aunt Maud, a huge grin on her face, a tremendous bowl in her stalwart arms. From the bowl rose a tantalizing aroma. She waddled in, plunked it on the nearest desk.

"Thought you folks might be sort of hungry after a scrap," she grinned. "Watched it from the cave. Nice, cozy place to watch a fight from. Saw morning was coming on, so I brought you down some breakfast.

"Sister—" She glanced at the sallow-cheeked Enid shrewdly. "You look sort of peaked. You too, Crystal. You look older, honey. Well, Greg—ready? We'd better be running along. 'Tina's got our breakfast almost ready. Fruit juice and porridge and pancakes with butter and sugar-syrup. Sounds good, eh? Well, 'bye, folks!"

And by main force she herded the two men swiftly out of the skiff. Outside, moving toward the hill, Sparks turned on her pettishly.

"Now, what did you go and do that for, Aunt Maud—you've gummed up everything! Greg was telling 'em off; just beginning to make 'em listen to reason—"

Aunt Maud grinned and winked broadly at Greg.

"Sparks, are all radiomen as dumb as you, or do you hold the championship? Greg could talk from now to doomsday and not get anywhere with that outfit. I *know*. They're my own haughty, independent, pigheaded flesh and blood.

"But that stew I brought them—" She chuckled and rolled her eyes delightedly. "Now, that's a *real* argument. The best their bellies ever listened to. Just wait and see!"

VII

THE TRUTH of her statement was exhibited very soon. That very afternoon, in fact. The dim Titanian sun was settling toward the westward hilltops, and Greg was just putting the finishing touches to a crude grist-mill he was rigging for the women, when there came the scrape of

hesitant footsteps up the rocky pathway.

Hannigan had been away since breakfast time, making a survey of the natural resources within easy distance of their cave. Greg thought it was the radioman returning.

"Hi!" he shouted over his shoulder, without looking back. "Any luck? What did you find?" Then, as no voluble, profane, fantastic answer was forthcoming, he turned around. His eyes momentarily betrayed his astonishment. "Oh! Hello, Andrews!" he said.

Bert Andrews shuffled uncomfortably. His gaze held a curious mixture of wistfulness, reluctance and expectancy. He said, in a voice that was a trifle too breathlessly nonchalant, "Hello, Malcolm. Just taking a little stroll, so I thought I might drop up and see—see how you're making out." He glanced about him, obviously impressed. "Not so bad," he said. "Not bad at all! That's the cave, I suppose? See you have things pretty well straightened out. What's that?"

Greg's gaze followed his nod to the crosswork which was suspended directly above the cave-mouth; a latticework of steel, firmly wire-lashed, secured by a rope, the stretch of which dipped into the cave itself.

"Barrier-shield," explained Greg. "Hangs on a pulley. We can drop it from inside. In case of attack, you see. Slides down that groove into the channel cut in the ground, holds tight there." He grunted. "That's one of the reasons we don't have any honest-to-John furniture in our home. We had too many other important uses for the metal."

"Clever," said Andrews. "Ingenious. I—er—got to thinking over what you said this morning, Malcolm, after you left. You were right. For a group of civilized people we let ourselves get into sorry shape."

He rubbed his chin reflectively. Greg noticed for the first time that his face was no longer dark with beard; that though his clothes were still dirty, he had made an effort to straighten them, dust them. The skin of his face, though, was pink and sore; chafed.

Greg said, "What in the world did you shave with, Bert? A cross-cut saw?"

Andrews said defensively, "The electric razor won't work. The dry-cells are ex-

hausted, and we can't use D. C. without wasting fuel. There wasn't a honed blade aboard the skiff. I used my pocket-knife. It—" he confessed ruefully, "It wasn't very sharp."

Greg said, "Hannigan mounted carborundum sheets on a lathe wheel and put edges on a couple steak knives for us. I'll let you have one before you go back. Hey, there he is now! What's the story, Sparks?"

Hannigan came into the clearing at a trot. He was excited. He said, "Sweet Christmas cow, Greg, you know what I run across? A—What's this? Company?"

The eager, interested look fled from Bert Andrews' eyes. He said stiffly, "I—I guess I'll be running along now, Malcolm. See you again."

HE TURNED, his shoulders very stiff. Too stiff to be convincing. Greg glanced at him appraisingly, motioned the radioman to keep his mouth shut, called after the young Andrews.

"Don't go yet, Bert. We're just getting ready for dinner."

"Dinner?" The young man spun like a top. Then he recalled his dignity. "Oh—dinner! Why, I guess ours is almost ready, too. 'Bye—"

We'd be glad to have you stay," said Greg levelly, striving to keep the amusement out of his voice. "I think there's a roast tonight. Something that looks like a young suckling pig can't exactly tell, though, till we taste it. These Titanian animals are different. Then there's a salad and potatoes and beans, a fruit compote, and I think 'Tina baked a pie today."

Andrew's eyes widened as his lips twitched. "I—I wouldn't want to be any trouble," he said faintly.

"No trouble at all," said Greg. Then, unable longer to restrain himself, "But of course if you think they'll be expecting you—?"

"No, I'll stay!" blurted Andrews hastily. "Thanks. I can wash up somewhere."

"Inside. Ask Aunt Maud for soap. She's the custodian of that." Then, as the young man disappeared into the cave hurriedly, Greg grinned at Hannigan. "One!" he said.

"You want to hear about what I seen?" demanded the redhead. "Listen, it was

terrific! Great big marsh, full of the damnedest life-forms and craziest vegetation anybody ever met up with. Hot, too! Steamy, like the Grand Marshes of Venus, only not quite as stinking—"

He stopped, annoyed. "One what? You ain't listening to a word I'm saying. Don't you want to hear?"

"Later, Sparks," said Greg. "Right now I'm wondering how long it will take the others to fall in line."

IT DIDN'T take long. The citadel of stubbornness had been undermined the night of the attack, it toppled with Bert Andrews' "friendly visit"—from which, some time later, he staggered home glassy-eyed with an overdose of wild roast, hot vegetables, crisp greens and luscious fruits, succulent berry pie—and it crashed, violently, the next day.

Bert Andrews brought his dad up the hill, presumably to confer with Malcolm on a future mutual defensive system; the two of them lingered for lunch—and after lunch old J. Foster, with the blunt directness which accounted for his success in Earth's business world, sat back, grunted comfortably, and said, "That's the first meal I've enjoyed since I was a pup in Service! Malcolm, you win! I'm sick and tired of this squabbling, and of our hand-to-mouth existence down there. Is there room for me in this cave of yours?"

It was no moment for gloating triumph. Greg said, "Yes, sir."

"Then I'm moving in. And so is my wife. What do you want me to do?"

Greg said, "Hannigan and I were planning to break ground for a small farm this afternoon, but this is more important. We'll go down with you and help you move up your personal things. How about—" he hesitated briefly—"how about Crystal? And Breadon?"

"I don't know," said J. Foster unhappily. "But if they're smart, they'll quit kicking against the pricks, too."

They were smart. When Andrews and his son, accompanied by Hannigan, Tommy and Greg, appeared at the skiff to move the Andrews' property, when Andrews told them bluntly that he and Enid and Bert were casting their lot in with the cave-dwellers, there was a moment of sultry silence, fraught with reluctance, anger,

recrimination—then Breadon bowed to the inevitable. Not with good grace, but with grudging agreement he said, "Very well. If that's the way you want it, Mr. Andrews. If we're welcome up there, Malcolm—?"

Greg said, "You are welcome, Breadon. I told you that a week ago." And promptly forgot Breadon and Breadon's surliness as he realized that Crystal, too, had been shamed into a recollection of her feminine duty to herself. Somewhere she had found cosmetics, and somehow she had managed to clean and press out a fawn-colored desert sun-suit. Once again, ash-blond hair combed back to a shoulder-length veil of shimmering loveliness, pale golden skin fresh and creamy and fragrant beneath the sheer silk of her abbreviated costume, she was the glamorous, crystal-lovely Crystal of more leisured days. A woman at once lovely, challenging and—desirable.

Thus the nation divided against itself was united. And thus began the second phase of the refugees' struggle to exist against staggering odds on the lonely, hostile moon of Saturn.

VIII

A MAZINGLY, the period of readjustment was not long, nor was it arduous. It was accomplished briefly, surely, in a series of emphatic object lessons. There was Enid Andrews, for instance. On her first afternoon in the cave she called Tina to her side, ordered the beautification of her face, her hair, her nails, and with a sigh of relief surrendered to the ministrations of the younger girl.

Greg, witness to this, frowned. But he motioned for silence when Aunt Maud would have made some irate comment.

That evening, by former agreement, Enid washed the dinner dishes. When Tina stepped forward to dry them, Greg stopped her.

"Sit down, Tina. Mrs. Andrews will dry them."

Enid started, gasped, stared at the huge pile appalled. Tina said, "But there are so many of them, Greg. Ten of us—"

"You have done extra work today," said Greg suavely, "to earn your rest. Mrs. Andrews is in your debt. She must work out her obligation. We have," he con-

tinued pointedly, "no servants or masters here. Courtesies must be repaid in kind."

Only twice more did the lessons have to be repeated; once when Bert Andrews gluttonously devoured an entire berry pie and was made to spend the next lunch-hour picking fruit for another; again when Breadon carelessly fouled the spring by washing in it, and in penance was required to construct a clay-and-stone dam below the spring, that in the future the community might have adequate bathing facilities; after that everyone understood that he had his allotted share of work, that the work must be done, that meals, warmth, comfort and safety could be earned only by sweat and toil.

And gradually the rude cave dwelling began to take on the semblance of a home. During the short days at their disposal before Titan, pursuing its cosmic rounds, plunged into the umbra of its gigantic mother planet, every member of the refugee corps worked feverishly to prepare and fortify for the dark days to come.

It was well that they did so, for when the darkness descended, ensued a bleakness even more terrifying than Greg had anticipated. The eclipse of Titan by its parent was no mild, momentary phenomenon like the eclipsing of Earth by Luna; it was a five day cessation of all heat and light.

With the darkness came sweeping, icy winds, gales monstrously violent, and incredible cold. From a sky black and terribly came the snow, five inches of it in an hour, eight feet of it in a day. It was alarming at first. Then Greg and all of them realized that the very ferocity of the storm was their salvation! Were there to be this frightful cold *without* snow, not all the fires of Gehenna, not all the clothing and blankets in the universe, could have protected them. But the snow, dropping like a sodden, white blanket, choked and filled the mouth of their cave, piled thicker and thicker, enswaddling them in a fleecy comfort that kept out the bone-brittling blasts.

Then they thanked the foresight that had led them to build up a roof-touching fuel reserve, a store of fresh produce and game, for they could not leave their refuge. They were snowbound until Titan left the shadow of Saturn and the warth should again melt their prison walls.

But those days were not days of idleness; they were days of accomplishment. The women, under Tina's guidance, ripped apart unneeded goods salvaged from the skiff's stores—tarpaulins, extra bedding and napery, carpeting, drapes—and restitched them into more needed, more practical articles of wearing and household apparel.

BREADON and Greg, laying aside a mutely-acknowledged hostility, pooled their knowledge and ingenuity in an effort to ascertain their whereabouts on the satellite. Neither had studied mathematics closely, a fact each now bewailed. But they had a few books on astrogation, taken from the skiff, and they had determination and intelligence. Utilizing some of their precious, dwindling store of forged metal, they constructed a crude but—they believed—reasonably accurate sextant with which, when the darkness was gone, they hoped to take celestial readings that would aid their computations.

In the making of this, Greg was forced to sacrifice something that had been for almost ten years as much a part of him as his arms and legs. His spectacles. Strangely, he did not miss them much after the first day. Their purpose had been mainly to protect him from eyestrain and headaches in a confined vocation that required much reading. But here on Saturn's satellite, health improved by hard labor, Greg had experienced no headaches. He was, in fact, almost disgustingly healthy. He could tell by the straining of his clothes at throat and chest and waistband that he was gaining weight; his appetite had improved and when night came, he did not have to read himself to sleep.

Young Tommy took upon himself the task of chronicling their exile. His method, though extravagantly romantic as befitted his years and enthusiasm for this adventure, was nonetheless efficient. He laboriously scraped smooth a wide portion of the cave-wall; on this he inscribed a calendar, a log, and a map of such portions of the satellite as they had so far explored.

Meanwhile Sparks Hannigan fretted over his damaged radio set. An accomplished bug-pounder, he took little time to get the wiring rearranged. The replace-

ment of metal parts was a tougher problem, but it, too, he solved with the aid of their acetylene torch.

One final job, however, stopped him cold. He shook his head when he spoke of it to Malcolm.

"The tubes, Greg. It just ain't no use. We can't operate the radio less'n we got tubes, and ours is gone. I guess I'm just wasting my time."

Greg said, "Isn't there a type of radio that works without tubes? Operates on a crystal, or something?"

Sparks said, "Yeah. But it ain't got no power. We got to get a message plumb off the satellite, out into space where it can be picked up by a Space Patrol cruiser. Or the Saturn lightship."

"And that's impossible? Suppose you had glass?"

"Can you make it?" scoffed Sparks.

"Maybe," said Greg. "Glass was accidentally discovered in the first place, you know, by Phoenician sailors who built a fire on a sandy beach wherein was imbedded raw chunks of natron. We might be able to do the same."

Sparks shook his head glumly. "O.Q. So that gives us glass. We still got to blow it, and figger out some way of sucking the air out, and winding filaments. Oh, understand, I ain't saying we can't *do* it, Greg. But it'll take years."

Greg nodded soberly.

"Well, we'll overlook no bets. Sparks—tell you what to do. You go ahead and build one of those simple "crystal" sets, just in the event that someday a scout ship or exploration plane should come within our range. Andrews is an important man, you know. Earth won't dismiss him casually as 'Lost in Space.' We'll also, as soon as the Sun comes back, clear a wide swath in the plain below us and construct a huge SOS sign of wood and underbrush that will be visible by day and can be set afire by night.

"Then, if we should ever hear the signal of a scout ship, we'll hope they see our marker."

"If I" grunted Sparks.

"What's that?"

"Skip it!" said Hannigan. "I was just making book against myself."

SO GREG maintained an optimism before the others, an optimism he did not entirely feel himself. Always he talked of the day they would leave Titan, but sometimes he wondered if that day would ever come.

And truth to tell, there were periods when he almost hoped that day would not ever come! For here, a thousand million miles from the Earth that had borne him, Gregory Malcolm had finally come into the rulership that, on Earth, he could never win, but that here was his by right of greater strength and knowledge.

He gazed about him, musing, and saw a cavern bright with candles that *he* had taught the womenfolk to render from the fats of wild beasts, warm with a flame *he* had kindled and nurtured, comfortable with furnishings *he* had constructed to their purpose. He saw nine men and women, a half dozen of whom had been his "superiors" aforetime, but who now looked to him for guidance, protection and leadership.

His mind's eye pierced the rock walls of the cavern and gazed, marveling, at the cosmos as viewed from desolate Titan. When these snows melted he could stand upon the hillside beneath the flaming moons of Saturn, beneath the never-ending wonder of Saturn's massive, multi-colored Rings, and say with Defoe's ancient castaway that here he, indeed, was monarch of all he surveyed.

This was his ordained fate; this was his brave, new world; these people were his subjects. And he was, for howsoever brief or long a time, an Emperor. And the white, the whirling stars—these were his empire!

Perhaps he was not the only one of that group who saw this truth. For there was more than mere grudging lip-service in the changed attitude of Andrews and his wife and son. Bert Andrews was a changed boy. His wilfulness had vanished; his allegiance to Greg was ardent. Maud Andrews' affection for Greg was an obvious thing. She saw to it that he was first fed, first clothed, first taken care of in all things; hers was an attitude of fierce maternalism, springing from a breast that had never known motherhood.

And—there was another strange

thing, too. A thing of singing glory that Greg could scarce believe, even though its truth was exhibited to him in a thousand little ways.

Crystal Andrews!

A great change had come upon Crystal Andrews since the loss of the *Carefree*. Of the old Crystal, only one part remained. Her blindingly radiant beauty. Her selfishness, her coldness, had fled, had been banished as her accustomed languidness had been banished by the obligation of labor.

Daily her attitude toward Greg grew more intimate. From aloofness she melted into acceptance, acceptance faded and became approval. Approval waxed as transpiring events proved time and again Greg's wisdom and his right to rule; there came upon the girl an eagerness to be the first to do whatever he suggested.

This was good, and as it should be. But there was something else, too; something deeper. At first Greg could not understand it, then gradually its meaning became clear even to his wholly-masculine mind. The sudden glance . . . the lingering touch of hand against hand as they chanced to pass one another . . . the host of unnecessary little questions that brought them into contact a dozen times a day . . . the sweeping flush when he, looking up unexpectedly, met her gaze. All these and other things. The lithe, sure, free, but overwhelmingly feminine allure of her body, shoulder brushing his as they sat before the fireplace in the long evenings. The slow caress of her voice when she spoke his name. The moment of swift alarm—a torpid snake that had somehow wriggled into the cavern, toward the warmth of the fire—and Crystal in his arms for all too short a moment. And drawing away reluctantly when the "danger" was past.

HE SHOULD have known from these things. Or from the amused glances of Sparks Hannigan, or the increased surliness of Ralph Breadon, or from the sudden loss of gaiety on the part of 'Tina.

"What's the matter with you, 'Tina? Don't you feel well lately?"

Her eyes avoiding his. "I'm all right, Greg. It's nothing."

"But you don't sing any more. You've

sure you're well? There's nothing I can do for you?"

"No." Her voice low. "No, thank you."

"But I want you to be happy. Look, 'Tina—let's you and me play cribbage tonight like we used to? We haven't had a game for weeks. How about it?"

"Oh, Greg—would you like to? Really?"

Her dullness slipping away from her like a dropped cape; her voice throbbingly eager. Then another voice at his elbow, a throaty, heart-stirring voice. "Oh, Greg—me, too? May I play? Will you teach me the game?"

Greg turned, smiling. "Why, of course. We'll get Sparks and make it a four-handed game. Eh, 'Tina?"

But 'Tina drew back, her eyes hurt again and distant. Her voice faint. "N-no, Greg. You and Crystal. I don't think I want to. . ."

Which Greg could not understand. But gradually, out of his confusion and miscomprehension, one truth came clear. And with its coming there was a sudden singing in his heart, a fire in his veins. He loved Crystal Andrews. And Crystal Andrews loved him!

THEN one day they woke to find the floor of the cave glistening darkly with a pool of water. The snow was melting from the mouth of the cave. When they attacked the weakened snowbank with shovels and brooms, laughing and fighting their way clear of the white barrier, they discovered that the dark days had ended, that once again the sky of Titan was silver-blue and bright, that already the warmth had turned the snow mantle to chuckling rivulets that ran merrily down the hills, leaving fresh green in its wake. The miracle of Titan's "winter" had passed, and the land would again be theirs for three warm weeks.

Greg's brain was afire with a hundred projects. A viaduct to carry water into the cavern during the next cold period. They had had to depend on melted snow this time. A study of the stars with their new sextant. The clearing of ground for the gigantic signal. He turned to the others enthusiastically.

"We've got to work now, folks, as we never worked before! Tommy, I want you to get right to work on that new via-

duct we were talking about. Andrews, your first job will be to replenish the wood supply. Try the west woods, that's the best timber. 'Tina, see what these short 'winters' do to the vegetation, will you? I don't imagine they're dead. Nature has ways of counteracting its own excesses. I believe we'll find the vegetation here on Titan is phenomenally hardy. But see, anyway.

"Aunt Maud—you and Enid set out those traps we made during the dark spell. We'll have a hot stew tonight. Breadon, suppose you and Sparks and I go down to the plain and start planning our signal system? Crystal—"

Crystal was at his side, her hand on his arm. "I'm going with you, Greg."

"What? But they need you—Oh, all right!"

He smiled. Behind him Aunt Maud snorted and disguised the snort with a rattling cough. 'Tina looked at him oddly for a moment before she turned obediently toward where last week there had been a vegetable patch. Her eyes were hurt. Greg could not understand why.

It was not until he was halfway down the hill that he remembered he had promised to let her help with the sign project. Of course it was too late to do anything about it then. Besides, Crystal's feet were unsteady on the melting path. She needed his arm about her for support. And her hair had a tantalizing fragrance all its own. . .

IX

IT TOOK all of the men, working steadily from dawn to dusk every day, two full weeks to construct the signal. When it was done, Greg looking down upon it from their hilltop eyrie, gazed upon it with approval and found it good.

Across the mile-wide flatness of the plain they had heaped huge piles of branches, faggots, brush, forming the letters "S O S." Green, they stood out boldly; withered and faded, their brownness would be equally clear.

Hannigan was pleased with his share of the work, too.

"—wire," he finished, "from the bottom of the 'S' to the cave. We just about had

enough, too. Anyhow, if the ship should happen to come at night instead of in the daytime, all we got to do is push the switch, and a spark'll jump in the tinder. Send the whole signal up in flame in less time than you can say 'integral calculus.'" He frowned. "If," he added, "a ship comes at all. Which of course I couldn't say yes or no."

"It will come," said Greg absently. He said it because it was the thing to say; as a matter of habit. He was not even thinking of his words. He was thinking, now that this project had been accomplished, of other things. Of a silo that must be built. They had nine head of livestock now, due to Tommy O'Doul's persistence. The beasts would have to be provided with winter quarters. One goat in the cave had not been so bad, last month. But nine goats— Perhaps, he thought, that small cave next to ours. If we could dig into it through the west wall . . . make a small opening. . .

His lack of concentration brought a false conclusion from the third man in the group. Ralph Breadon stirred restively.

"You should say," he insinuated, "if Malcolm *wants* a ship to come!"

The words penetrated Greg's thoughts of the future slowly. He turned a blank, questioning look on the other.

"Eh?"

"I merely said," repeated Breadon, "that one could not condemn a man in your position for showing lack of enthusiasm in a rescue party."

Greg stared at him thoughtfully.

"Just what do you mean by that, Breadon?"

Breadon shrugged.

"Isn't it fairly obvious? Two short months ago you were a nobody. A secretary without background, position or authority. Today you're the demigod of Titan. Sir Boss. I don't complain; I merely comment. You have everything a man could ask for. Authority . . . security . . . a woman. . ."

The last jolted Malcolm out of his apathy. He took a swift step forward, gripped Breadon's lapels with a fist grown heavier, rougher, with labor.

"If you mean Crystal, Breadon—"

Breadon stood his ground. "Let go of me, Malcolm. I'm not going to fight you

again. Of course I mean Crystal. It's perfectly obvious that you and she—Oh, hell, man! Don't be a hypocrite! After all, when people live as intimately as we do, in one little cave, . . ."

GREG felt dark anger welling up within him like a gall-tinctured flood. Rage not that Breadon should say this thing, but that there should be cause for his thinking it. He choked, thickly, "Damn you, Breadon—there's not a thing wrong between Crystal and me. I love her, yes. And Crystal loves me. We've only been waiting till this big job was finished—"

"Then if I were you," retorted Breadon wearily, "I wouldn't wait any longer. Or is it another case of the king being incapable of doing wrong? Anyhow, I think you understand what I mean now. Two months ago a marriage between you and Crystal Andrews would have been ridiculous. Today—"

He shrugged again. Greg glared at him wrathfully, impotently, for a long moment. Then he spun on his heel, led the way down the hill to the cave. Sparks scurried along behind him anxiously. "Now, look, Greg—don't do nothing you might regret—"

"Shut up! I'll handle this!"

At the cave he called all the settlers before him. They came from their tasks, surprised, wondering. He wasted no time. He broached the subject boldly.

"Because we ten are marooned here on a desert satellite," he said savagely, "without a clergyman, there is no reason we must abandon all the rights and privileges of civilized society. Human emotions have a habit of enduring. I think it is no secret that Crystal Andrews and I have fallen in love. I intend, therefore, to marry her as soon as it can be arranged.

"Crystal—" He turned to the girl. "Do I speak for you as well as for myself?"

The girl nodded and stepped forward into the circle of his arm. "You know you do, Greg."

J. Foster Andrews looked pleased. He said, "That's fine, son. But who's going to do the marrying?"

"You are. As owner of the *Carefree*, you were also its commander. I think the space code would permit your acting in capacity of justice." Greg's anger melted.

"I'm not being very formal about this, sir. Perhaps I should ask for your permission."

"You have it, my boy! And now—" Archly. "When will the —hrrumph!— happy event take place?"

Greg looked at Crystal questioningly. "Next week?" she said, "I'll have to have a little time, Greg."

"That's it, then," said Greg. "Next week. When the dark period comes."

THE LITTLE group broke up, then. One by one they murmured words of congratulation and approval to their leader and his bride-to-be and drifted away. Finally Crystal went back into the cave, and Greg was left alone with Tina, who alone of all the group, had so far said nothing. He went to her.

"You haven't told me you're happy, Tina."

She turned slowly.

"Shall I say so, Greg?"

"I want you to. Why do you act so strangely toward me, Tina? Do you dislike me? You used to—"

"I'm happy," she cried suddenly. "Now I've said it. You want me to. Are you satisfied? Why don't you let me alone, Greg? Must I like or dislike you? You have one woman? Must you—" She broke from his side, raced forward to the edge of the hill, stared blindly down into the plain. Greg moved after her, worried. "What is it, Tina? You're *not* happy! Are you lonely? Why don't you get married, too? Sparks . . . or Breadon . . ."

He stopped, his gaze over her shoulder settling on something in the valley beneath. A thing incredible to behold, but that was . . . yes, *was* . . .

"Tina!" he gasped.

At the tone of his voice she spun swiftly, anxiously. "What is it, Greg?"

"Look! Down there! A—a human!"

X

"MORE GRUEL, Marberry?" asked Aunt Maud solicitously. "Can you eat another spoonful?" She glared at those who ringed the reclining spaceman belligerently. "Why don't you let him alone?" she demanded. "Greg Malcolm,

I thought you had better sense! The man's weak and sick!"

Marberry's eyes were like charred pockets, but he summoned a weak smile.

"I'm all right," he said. "There isn't much more to tell. We managed to cut free from the *Carefree* just before she crashed. Four of us. Lipstead, Hawkins, Craeburn and myself. Our skiff cracked up in a mountain gorge. Craeburn was killed, and Lipstead broke his leg. But we fixed it up in splints, and he got by.

"When the snow came—" He shut his eyes momentarily, as though to rid them of a persistently evil vision. "When the snow came we almost died. We ran short on fuel, and the skiff leaked. Then the electro-stove ran down, and we had to eat cold, canned food.

"Even so, we pulled through. But when it got warm again, Hawkins said we mustn't spend another winter in the skiff. We had to find a cave in the mountains, he said. So we abandoned the ship and started moving. It was then that they caught us."

Breadon, who had entered late, asked, "Who?"

"Natives of Titan," Greg capitulated briefly. "He described 'em to us before you came in. Savages. Cannibals. Humanoid, but no culture. Funny physical make-up, like the Uranians. Don't feel the cold at all. Murdering devils. From what he says, we're lucky they haven't found us before this."

Breadon said, "Cannibals!" and looked allay. The supine man continued weakly.

"We had to leave Lipstead behind. He couldn't run. He drew a gun on us, threatened to kill us all if we didn't leave him. We heard his gun afterward. He must have got a half dozen of them before—before they got him.

"Then Hawkins and me split up. It was the only way, he said. One of us might be lucky. I—I guess I was. They followed him instead of me. And all the time—" His voice raised feverishly. "And all the time, we was only about ten miles from here! If we'd only known—"

Aunt Maud would stand for no more. She bustled between the invalid and his listeners, shooed them away angrily. "Run along, now. This man needs sleep and quiet. Go 'way!"

BUT LATER, as Marberry slept the sleep of exhaustion, Greg called a council of war.

"Ten miles," he said soberly. "If those creatures are only ten miles from here, we can expect an attack almost any day. Or moment. From now on, we must keep a watch at all times. No one must leave the cave alone."

Hannigan said, "You reckon they'll find us, Greg? Titan's a big hunk of dirt."

"They're savages. Savages can follow the faintest trails of wild animals, let alone the spoor of a frightened, sick man. They'll be here."

Hannigan said, "There's one good hunk of news in the whole sorry mess. Marberry said him and his companions sent out radio SOS calls for three solid weeks. Till their radio run dry. Maybe somebody picked up one of them calls. Maybe there's help on the way right now."

"Radio. Speaking of radio, Sparks, how about that crystal receiving set you were working on? Is it finished?"

Sparks smiled sourly.

"Finished your sainted sandals! It's all washed up. Listen to this!"

He stepped to the hodge-podge of wires and coils on which he had been laboring, adjusted it. From its diaphragm came dismal sounds. Squawks, squeals, quavering vibrations.

"Static," said Breadon.

"Double it," gloomed Hannigan, "and add a thousand. The worst kind of static. An electrical disturbance field."

Greg frowned. "But that can't be, Sparks. There's no electricity around here. No generating plants or—"

"It can't be," snorted Sparks, "but it is. I don't know what makes it act that-away. Maybe it's the H-layer of this cockeyed satellite. Sun spots, maybe. Whatever it is, it sure gums up my machine." He stared at the tiny set helplessly.

Greg stirred himself.

"Well, then we'll have to look forward to fighting this battle without hope of assistance. Andrews, I want you and Tommy to inspect the cave-mouth barrier immediately, see that it's in perfect shape and reinforce it. Ralph, you and Sparks drive the livestock into the small cave so they'll be hidden. 'Tina, the fuel reserve?"

"Complete, Greg."

"Good! I'm going out to stand the first watch. If you need me, I'll be—"

At that moment a small figure, bristled-haired with excitement, came scampering into the cave.

"Greg!" cried Tommy O'Doul. "Greg—they're down there! On the plain. I seen them. And I—I think they seen me, too! They're heading up this way!"

A HALF HOUR later, Greg, flanked by a tight-jawed little band of compatriots, crouched in the bottle-mouth of an altered cavern.

The short time that had elapsed since Tommy O'Doul gave the alarm had been minutes of swift preparation. What little of water, food and supplies could be brought into the cave had been hustled in by eager hands. The stock had been herded into the small, adjoining cave, and boulders had been rolled against the cave mouth. The metal grill had been dropped before the mouth of their own cage; it was behind this they now crouched, through this that Greg looked out upon a lead-gray sky and green hills.

"There's one thing," said Greg. "One break in our favor. It's starting to get darker, and it's barely afternoon. We must be dipping into the penumbra of Saturn. In a little while the darkness should come, and the gales and the cold."

Hannigan said, "That ain't no break for us. Marberry said they didn't feel heat and cold."

"I know. But they can't prevent the snow falling. If it comes down like it did during the last dark spell, we will have an eight-foot fall of ice between us and our attackers."

Andrews looked at the sky anxiously.

"But until it snows, Greg?"

"We fight!" said Greg grimly.

Bert Andrews, who had wriggled forward on his belly to the furthestmost ell of the bottle-neck, ducked back hastily, twisted his head over his shoulder.

"Then we fight now!" he rasped. "Here they come!"

It was then that the Earth-exiles saw, for the first time, the dominant race of Saturn's sixth satellite. To see was to marvel that Nature had once again—as on Earth, Mars, Uranus and Io—selected the

bipedal humanoid form in creating a ruling race. Except for the thick, downy pelts that covered these Titanian's bodies, the low, slanting, bestial foreheads, the depth of breast and rapacious mouth slits, these creatures were the counterparts of man.

But there were other unapparent differences, thought Greg. Marberry had reported the Titanians impervious to heat and cold, which argued a difference in normal body temperature and perhaps a difference in basic metabolism. There must be sharp differences between man's mentality and that of these man-like beasts, as well, else they would not come seeking their interplanetary guests as the huntsman seeks his quarry.

A long, questing, silver-pelted line, they climbed the hillside path to the flat clearing before the cave. They paused there, peering about them suspiciously, nostrils wide and eyes searching. Greg realized, suddenly, that these man-things were far down humanity's scale; so much of the animal was in them that they placed more dependence in their olfactory than in their visual sense. They seemed to catch the man scent, the spoor they had been following. Their leader moved forward to the grillwork. Hannigan's shoulder brushed that of Greg as he wriggled forward.

"Now, Greg? Shall we let 'em have it?"

Greg whispered hurriedly, "When I give the word, all fire at once. Remember, we have very little ammunition. We must make every shot count. Ready?"

He glanced at his all-too-tiny fighting crew. Bert Andrews, old J. Foster, Breardon, Sparks, himself. "Tommy," he ordered, "go back into the cave!"

"Aw!" said Tommy—but obeyed. Greg glanced about him once more. Others of the Titanians had slunk to their leader's side now. Their voices, guttural and monosyllabic, carried plainly over the few intervening yards.

"Now!" cried Greg.

FIVE RIFLES spoke as one. Their conjoined thunder beat deafeningly upon the sweating cavern walls, echoed and re-echoed, ripping at Greg's eardrums. But another sound pierced the roar of gunfire. The shrill, pain-laden screams of stricken man-things. The inquisitive leader

fell without ever knowing the cause of his death. A Titanian behind him opened his slit-mouth in a flat, high scream, turned to run, tearing at his gaping chest with claws that crimsoned as he tore. He took three steps, toppled, crashed. Another body was beneath his own; still another fell upon his.

Old J. Foster's lips were white. He turned to Greg, sickened and trembling.

"We can't do this, Greg! It's slaughter!"

A weak voice cackled derision. "Don't feel sorry for 'em. If they get in here, they'll show you what a real slaughter looks like. Malcolm, have you got a gun for me?"

It was the sailor, Marberry. Greg said, "Go back and rest a while longer, Marberry. We have no more guns."

"I'll get Tommy's."

"Rest. This siege may last all day, all night or for a week. You'll get your turn."

Marberry disappeared. Greg said, "Fire! Keep on firing! They're bewildered. Maybe they'll break and run."

Again the salvo of gunfire rocked the corridor, and again foremost figures slumped to the ground, slicing the ranks of the attackers. But now, peering through the grill, Greg saw that he had underestimated the manpower of the attackers. They were not a dozen or two dozen . . . there were a hundred of them milling, now, in the small clearing, and the path was still clogged with the silvery bodies of others lumbering to the attack.

What happened in the next hour was such stuff as nightmares are made of. At first Greg cautioned himself each time he pulled the trigger of his rifle that he must make his shot count; later he fell into a dull, scarce-comprehending state of monexistence wherein he was conscious only of the nerveless and repeated movements of his hands. Aim . . . load . . . fire! Aim again . . . load . . . fire . . . aim . . .

And at first there was little need for aiming. For the Titanians, savagely prodigal of life, knew only one way of fighting—to press forward in brute force, attempting to crush down the metal grill that stood between them and their vengeance. To fire into that thick press of bodies was sure havoc. The Titanians were weaponless save for the cudgels they whirled about their heads threateningly; nor could they

break down the barrier so long as the succeeding hands of all who gripped it became the limp, impotent hands of the dead.

Then at last even their dim, animal intelligence saw that this was a losing battle. A cry rose and was shuttled from mouth to mouth. The silvery figures, now gray in ever-gathering dusk, wisped away from the cave-mouth.

"Licked 'em!" cried Hannigan. "They're running, by Peter! Golly, Greg! Look at that pile out there!"

There was awe in his voice, distaste in Greg's eyes as he looked on the motionless mound heaped before the cave. But Greg said, "Don't get rash! They may be planning a new attack. Breadon—what's wrong with you, man?"

Ralph Breadon grinned wryly.

"Fortune's favored child, that's me! They didn't have any weapons to shoot me with, so I shot myself. Bounced a bullet off the grill. It came back and pinked my arm."

"Go get it dressed. There it comes!" cried Greg.

"The new attack?" Sparks whirled.

"The darkness. And the snow!"

He was right. The threatened period of darkness had descended at last. Once again Titan was within the shadow of its primary. And once again the vast winds were keen-ing from the hilltops, the great flakes of snow were tumbling from a lifeless sky. Greg's voice was exultant.

"Now we're safe! In an hour or so we'll be behind a fortress of ice. And I don't think they'll lay siege to us in a blizzard for a solid week."

His triumph was short-lived. For even as he anticipated victory, disaster beat on the portals of their refuge. From the depths of the cave came a shrill scream, the shout of Marberry, and Tommy's frantic cry—

"Greg! Come a-running! They've found the back entrance!"

THE back entrance! Greg's heart lurched. He cursed himself, suddenly, for having tried to accomplish too much in making their cavern habitable. For by so doing, he had rendered them vulnerable in a spot where would be no barrier of ice an hour hence.

The back entrance. The archway they

had broken out between their large cave and the smaller one wherein Tommy's livestock was herded. Somehow the Titanians had found the other cave, rolled away the boulders, and were now attempting to get at their quarry from the rear.

Greg shouted, "Andrews, you stand guard here! One man will be enough. The rest of you—come on!"

The first of the Titanians was pushing through the cleft just as he reached the main chamber. There was a look of unholy glee on the manlike creature's thin lips as he attained the cave. But it died there, suddenly, frostily. It was not Greg who dropped him. It was young Tommy, staggering under the recoil of a rifle almost as tall as himself, firing pointblank, bouncing back to reload manfully, bawling with youthful glee, "Got him, Greg!"

THEN there was no time for speech, because the Titanians were pouring through the breach in a howling, flame-eyed mob. For a moment Greg, even as he fought, felt despair touch his heart with leaden fingers. There was no grill here to bar the enemy's passage; the cleft was wide enough to admit three at a time. He and his companions were outnumbered ten, twenty to one.

But he did not, could not, take into consideration two vital facts. The first was the indomitable gallantry of his fellow exiles. He had expected that, in defense of their lives, their possessions, their women, the armed men would fight to the last breath. And they did. Pressing forward on relentless feet. Breadon, Andrews, Bert, Hannigan. But Greg had not realized that the women, too, could fight. As in a smoke-veiled dream he caught glimpses of their activities. Aunt Maud and Tina, armed with huge ladles, dipping their weapons into a massive pot of boiling water, flinging the scalding liquid at the cold-impervious but heat-sensitive invaders. Crystal, no longer a serene and radiant beauty, but a flaming Balkyr whose ash-blond hair tumbled about her, forgotten, gaining a vantage point at the very lip of the opening, slashing ferociously at the attackers with a monstrous cleaver. Enid Andrews racing to the wall, digging in Greg's duffle, pressing something into his hands.

"Your flame-pistol, Gregory!"

Greg grasped it eagerly. "Stand back, Crystal!"

She turned, and saw, and fled. And the ochre flame mushroomed into the heart of the still-charging Titanians. Their charge stilled, faltered, wavered, died. The stench of charred bodies was nauseous. Then there were screams of fear—and the Titanians were in rout!

Into the small cave they pursued them; from it but a handful of the silver-pelted savages escaped. And when the last living invader had disappeared, Greg turned to his exhausted followers with a smile of weary triumph.

"We'll see no more of them," he promised. "Already the snow is a foot deep. By morning both caves will be completely walled in. And I think we've taught them to fear us. What, Tina?"

For she was standing before him; her eyes were cool and positive . . . there was decision in her tone.

"I thought it was all over for us a moment ago," she said. "And I knew, then, Greg, that it was a mistake for me to die without having told you. I promised myself that if a miracle occurred . . . and we should live . . . I would tell you."

He said wonderingly, "But what, Tina? I don't—"

"I know you don't, Greg. That is why I must say it. I love you. Have loved you since that first day." Her eyes were grave. Greg's were embarrassed.

He said, "But you—you shouldn't say such things, Tina. Crystal—"

"She is a brave woman, Greg. But she is not your woman. She is his."

His gaze followed Tina's across the room, to where Crystal knelt beside the injured Breadon. She was cleansing his wound, which was as it should be. But there was a softness, a tenderness, to her motions . . . and a look in her eyes. Greg looked away, suddenly aware that even from the beginning he had felt this barrier between them. Perhaps Crystal had loved him, for a while and in a fashion. But she loved him for his strength, his power, his ability to rule. She was a woman of the ruling class; ever her conscious trend would be toward allegiance with those who led. But in the showdown . . . when instinct overcame logic . . .

Hannigan cried across the chamber, "What, Greg?"

"I didn't say anything," said Greg gruffly.

"But you did. I heard you say—*Omgawd!*" Sparks made a sudden leap toward the bench on which rested the forgotten crystal set. "It's this! *Listen!*"

STATIC still boiled through the speaker of the tiny set. But now, above the static, riding its vibrations, was superimposed the sound of a human voice. And the voice was calling, over and over again,

"Space Patrol Cruiser Orestes . . . calling survivors of the Carefree. We are looking for you. Where are you . . . where are you? Come in, Carefree survivors. Space Patrol Cruiser Orestes . . . calling survivors . . ."

Greg looked at "Tina. Then once again at Crystal, whose face, upturned with sudden, speechless joy, was the radiant vision of unattainable perfection. Then at Sparks, whose gaze met his reluctantly. He said, "Sparks—press the plunger."

Hannigan's hand moved slowly toward the control that would set into flame the gigantic brush-signal on the plain below. With strange reluctance, everything considered. For certainly Sparks realized as plainly as he, Greg, that the snow was falling with increasing rapidity, that the cruiser must be almost directly overhead for its signal to penetrate the raucous interference of static, that if this opportunity were lost it might be years and years before . . .

Sparks voice was low in his ears.

"Are you sure, Greg?"

And suddenly there was deathly silence in the cave. Never until that moment had Gregory Malcolm realized how completely was he the ruler of this tiny clan. Here, where all life and the future of life and the future of these men and women were concerned, the last great judgment was relegated to him.

He looked about him uncertainly. And what he read in his comrade's eyes surprised him. For there was reluctance in the eyes of Bert Andrews . . . a vague regret in those of old J. Foster Andrews . . . hope and pleading in those of the girl "Tina . . . frank disapproval in those of the woman they knew as 'Aunt Maud.'

Only the eyes of Crystal Andrews, who were he to let the cruiser pass might be his wife, was there mirrored fear and apprehension . . .

He shook himself. And with that small gesture he shrugged from his shoulders an ermine that had lain there all too briefly. Quietly he said the words that stripped him of his sceptre, that swept away his empire of the stars.

"Press it, Sparks!" he said.

"A REMARKABLY ingenious device, sir," said Captain Allengrove approvingly. "And you made use of it in the nick of time. We were just about to abandon the search when the snowy waste beneath us blossomed suddenly with that signal. I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner, sir. But—" And he glanced about the cavern appreciatively. "But you appear to have had matters under control."

J. Foster Andrews said, "Well—er—Captain, as a matter of fact, it wasn't—hrrumph!—altogether my doing. Greg, here—"

Captain Allengrove dismissed Malcolm with a glance.

"Yes, yes, I quite understand. One couldn't expect you to take care of all the minor details. But I must say, Mr. Andrews, you are a fortunate man. Inasmuch as you established residence on Titan, the Federation will be forced to acknowledge your priority claim to the heretofore unknown ore deposit near your cave."

"The—er—ore deposit?" Andrews looked blank.

Sparks hollered, "Oh, my sainted tonsils! The swamp! Of course! Pitchblende! That's why there was so much static interference! Radium!"

The cruiser's commander frowned on him.

"Exactly. Of course, Mr. Andrews, you cannot file a full claim to the property. That requires a full year's residence. And a man as important as yourself—"

Greg Malcolm started. He had said nothing up till now. He had been given an opportunity to say nothing. The captain had addressed himself solely to the one "important" man in their party, the man for whom, primarily, the search had been made, the man to whose "genius"

was attributed the existence of the castaways.

Now he spoke up. He said, "But *I* am establishing residence, Captain Allengrove."

Allengrove permitted himself the luxury of a small smile.

"You, Malcolm? But really, my dear fellow, only a spaceman could undertake such a task. A *secretary*—"

Aunt Maud waddled forward belligerently. She said, "Secretary—pah! Fiddle-faddle, Captain! You don't know what you're talking about! And as for you, Brother Jonathan, I'm ashamed of you! Taking credit for all this—arragh!" She turned to Greg. "Gregory, I'm an old woman, and perhaps I'm an old fool, as well. But I've had more fun and excitement in the past month than I've had in the previous forty years. Be—be *damned* if I'll go back to Earth and piddle away my remaining years at operas and pink teas. I'm staying here with you!"

Enid Andrews, into whose shoulders had so quickly come the grace and ease of authority that was her charm, looked shocked. "Maud!" she exclaimed.

Sparks Hannigan breathed a sigh of relief. "Then that makes three of us," he said. "Any more takers?"

Tommy O'Doul pushed his way to Greg's side. "Can I stay, too, Greg? Can I, huh? Me, too?"

Greg said gratefully, "If you want to, Tommy. But, Bert—*you*?"

FOR Bert Andrews had also aligned himself with his aunt and Sparks. Now he said defiantly, "What Aunt Maud says is good enough for me. I'll stick!"

Tina was already beside Greg; her gaze was fiercely loyal. She did not need to say anything. Captain Allengrove looked stunned. "But really," he said, "but really, this is most unusual! I mean, we were sent to rescue you! I—er—I don't quite see how you expect to survive without leadership—"

Aunt Maud snorted belligerently. "Leadership! You just leave us supplies and

we'll have all the leadership we need! Marberry, you're staying, aren't you? Well, that's seven of us. A lucky number! I don't suppose there are any more?"

She glared at Crystal. Greg, too, was watching the girl. Now before the steadfastness of their combined gazes, her eyes dropped. Her cheeks colored faintly. But she did not move from Breadon's side. She said, "I—I'm sorry. I hope you understand, Greg."

Greg said, "I understand."

"Furthermore," declared Aunt Maud staunchly, "I'm warning you, Jonathan! I know you! If you go home bragging about your part in the colonization of Titan, I'll follow you, so help me! And if you fail to keep us equipped with supplies—"

J. Foster said hurriedly, "Now, Maud!"

Captain Allengrove looked at them all uncomprehendingly. It didn't make sense. But he was a Space Officer—it was not his place to engage in family quarrels; his duty was to rescue what few of this astonishing crew wished to be rescued. He coughed nervously. He said, "Well, Mr. Andrews—if you're ready now?"

"Yes," said J. Foster. "We're ready now. Goodbye, Greg," he said. "And—er—thanks, old boy!"

Greg said levelly, "That's all right. Goodbye." He said, less levelly, "Goodbye, Miss Andrews."

But Crystal and Breadon were already turning toward the portal, toward the cruiser that would carry them back to an easier, gentler world. So at the end, there were no last farewells. Just a single word, and silence.

Yet somehow, strangely, Greg Malcolm did not mind too much. For in losing one thing, he had found much more. He was bulwariked with greater, truer friends than most men ever know . . . he stood in a cave that was his home . . . on a new world that was yet his shining, unblemished empire.

And there was the touch of a warm hand on his own.

0.0 is strictly from corn. Hack personified. A 1.0 yarn is quite poor but readable, 1.5 units classify it in that dim region somewhere on the border line between a poor and "fair" yarn, and a 2.0 unit tale is one that, while definitely not superior, is still "pretty good." 2.5 units indicates a story as average, 3.0 as good, 3.5 as very good, and 4.0 as a lesser, or minor, classic. A 4.5 unit rating is the classic position, while a 5.0, or perfect, story embodies those few—those cherished few—stories in my collection that I can call—"super-classics."

So here we go with the Hunter rating system—first the cover. 4.5 units. Virgil Finlay and G. J. Rozen are the only two artists who, in my opinion, can combine a semi-nude, lady-in-distress, picture with a science-fiction theme and still make the magazine attractive to both the ardent fan and the news-stand scanner. Bear this in mind when using future covers of this type, said type being the only kind you use anyway.

The interior illustrations average up to exactly 3.0, an improvement over the last two issues. The two Bob Leydenfrost pictures average 2.75, which certainly isn't as good as his "old man." Personally I think the fans are being a little quick on the trigger when they say he is as good, or nearly as good, as the elder Leydenfrost.

With an average of 3.25, Doolin managed to take top honors this time, while Rubimor stands at 2.5. He may, with a little more practice, develop into a good artist. He seems to show promise.

The Ringers take four units, bringing to a close the extra-curricular subjects, and we'll now get down to the stories themselves. Personally, I sometimes wonder why you run stories at all. Why not publish a magazine full of the Ringer Family's antics, and call it Gifford Comics? Oh, you don't like it, eh?

Miss Brackett, redeeming herself for *Citadel of Lost Ships*, takes first place this time, with three units. *Thralls of the Endless Night* was quite a bit better than many of the other "frontier-planet" stories now flooding the market.

2. *Revenge of the Vera*. 2.5. Hasse turns out nice adventure.

3. *Phantom Out of Time*. Also a 2.5 unit story. Bond's policy of mass production may be quite successful from a financial standpoint, but his popularity is certainly suffering.

4. *Prey of the Space Falcon*. 2.5. This could, as I have said before, have been handled better. But it should definitely be made into a series.

5. *Message from Mars*. 2.0.

6. *Mutiny in the Void and Assignment on Venus*. Both 2.0 unit stories.

That gives you an average of—let's see—exactly 2.8 units, as compared to 2.093 for March and 2.580 for May. I hope you continue to rise, especially now that you have returned to quarterly publication.

Although I never rate letter sections, the Vizigraph is excellent this time, probably because I didn't appear in its pages. Top place is easily decided, and goes to our N. B. C. character delineator, Wilms Herbert. Leonard Marlow is second, with a very timely and interesting letter, which I will comment on a little later. Third place is reserved for Vaughan Ralph Heiner, despite the fact that I agree with practically nothing he says. His letter was one of good, half-serious criticism, the like of which should be seen more often.

(Honest, Peacock, I'm trying to keep this down to one and a half pages, which would equal three double-spaced ones, but I can hardly unburden my

soul to an editor in less than two and a half single-spaced pages.) (Run on, little man. Ed.)

To comment on the letters individually, we skip over to Paul Carter's good one, which would have rated an illustration in most columns, but I thought some of the others a trifle better. However, the gentleman should receive some sort of extra-terrestrial award for that choice bit of dialogue between hero and villain. I have a notion to frame it and hang it above my desk, but a window occupies that space. Have to do something about that.

To Miss Fredersdorf, I give the following advice: You'd better become a little more experienced in reading science-fiction before you attempt to point out which plots are original and which ones are stale. That man-turns-out-to-be-robot-in-the-last-paragraph thing is strictly from cummings, and indeed, a stock idea with that gentleman. I could say that, as a spiritualist, James Russel Gray is just medium, but that will probably be pulled by many other punsters, so why should I spoil their fun—or pun.

If PLANET remained a bi-monthly publication, I would agree with Chad Oliver about serials, but three months is *too* long to wait. I suppose that I am one of those "crackpots" who have "insulted, panned and jeered" ray cummings about whom Chadwick refers, but although I cannot bring myself to even spell his name with capital letters, I don't pick his stories apart because this or that word appears too often.

From Oliver to dePina in one easy lesson. At last—at long last, we have an author who is not afraid of endangering his popularity by offering criticism. And I'm not saying that just because he voted for me, either. (Although it shows he recognizes literary talent, bright Staff Sergeant that he is.)

Marlow's letter was quite interesting, and I have taken it to heart. Witness this letter, for instance. I'm even sending it air mail in hopes you can substitute it for my letter about the May issue which has either been discarded altogether, or held over for next time.

So what do you say we take Leonard's advice. Real humor is always appreciated, but after all, too much is—well, too much. Get hold of yourselves, readers, and make the Vizigraph even better than it is now.

That concludes the reader's column this time, except for your note at the beginning. Editorial stuffiness, my pet zwilnik! You certainly are a long ways from having the *best* magazine on the market, but you certainly are the friendliest.

In closing, if you *do* see fit to award me Rozen's painting and with this letter I *should* happen to be picked for one of the winning spots on the sweepstakes, just give my position thereon to the next highest. Oh well, it's nice to end a letter with a little wishful thinking.

Scientifically yours,

GENE HUNTER,
The original *Space Falcon*.

WE'RE WIDE OPEN— IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE!

Earl Carroll Theatre Restaurant,
Hollywood, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

Since PLANET seems preponderantly to be a "man's" magazine, I'm wondering just how wide is your editorial "Door" to feminine readers of Science Fiction.

As you will undoubtedly see by the letterhead,

I am a show girl, dividing my time between Earl Carroll's Theatre, and medium roles at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. Such a background hardly ties in with science fiction; however, you would be surprised at the number of Thespians, both major and minor, who read science fiction for "escape." Yes—I might as well have the courage to come out with it. Escape fiction is in the ascendant—no one knows that better than you, an Editor. And of all escape fiction, *PLANET* and one other rival publication have the finest to be had. Recently I wrote you a brief letter, when lo and behold, one of your writers arrived next door, and in uniform! So, with heightened interest I make my debut as far as *PLANET* is concerned with a serious letter.

Beginning with the cover (perhaps the loveliest ever had), your Fall issue was for the most part superb. Your own lead novel, *Prey of the Space Falcon*, topped the list in quality, with an intricate and skillfully evolved plot that never for a moment lost its quality of suspense. I could deeply understand the motives of your heroine—women, being paradoxical are like that, even to the ultimate switch of allegiances which brought about the final thrilling closing of the story. I took a long time to decide which story really deserved second place, and after carefully weighing all pros and cons, came to the conclusion that Leigh Brackett's *Thralls of the Endless Night* deserved that place of honor—Miss Brackett has a superlative imagination, and a *rich vein of feeling* that imparts a glow of genuine warmth to all she writes. I truly believe that she is one of your two finest writers, judging from what I have read thus far. The other one is Albert de Pina, whom very recently I had the pleasure of meeting. Oh yes, I know you have a long list of top notchers—Nelson S. Bond, Henry Kuttner, Ross Rocklynne, Henry Hasse, Carl Jacobi, Clifford Simak, Charles Tanner, and a host of others—but if I may be permitted *airing* my predilections, those two mentioned above are my favorites. Of course, I haven't mentioned you, but then, you are the editor—you need no fulsome praise—your editorial toga is a proof of your literary excellence. (So there—you scoffers! Ed.)

The rest of the names I have mentioned, which formed a real science fiction galaxy, are all first rate—I would be the last to deny how many hours they have given me of real pleasure. But all of us have our private admirations.

My choice for third in the Fall issue is a tie. *Both Message from Mars* by Simak, and *Assignment on Venus*, by Jacobi, were excellent—I couldn't make up my mind which I liked best. Nelson S. Bond's *Phantom Out of Time* failed because it was really an elaboration of a double theme that I have often read in the three years I've been reading science fiction. It was well done, of course, but lacked that spark of originality that lifts a story out of the commonplace. I'm worried about Bond! He used to be one of my favorites, but although he has appeared in nearly every issue of *PLANET*, he seems to be following the drab and dingy road of the "*Hacketeers*!"

And now for the truly marvelous Winter Issue. At last you have given us what we so long have hoped for and had come to believe was not possible—a novel that has science, magnificent characterization, a description of Earth in the future so vivid that I lived every moment of it, and a unique ending that was *inspiring* because of the superb spirit of sacrifice for an ideal—Freedom—that both Terrans and Panadurs possessed. Palanth, the dandified Martian Explorer, was

sheer delight, and the girl was one of those heroines that are living, breathing beings, not a mere propo, and all too rare in STF. *The Star Guardsman*, by Albert DePina, will long be remembered as one of the finest stories in the science-fiction realm. My vote for second goes to Guy Gifford, the irrepressible humor of his cartoon rates it. Third was *Conspiracy in Callisto*, by James MacCreigh. Although only a novelet, its excellence of style, and dialogue, plus a beautifully handled plot leaves it uncontested. It was a delightful change from the usual plot. Forgive me, perhaps I am just dense, and my critical faculties are not very sound, but it seemed to me that your lead novel, *Crypt-City of the Deathless One* by Henry Kuttner, was devoid of science, far from clean-cut, and written in such a slipshod style, that it sounded like a re-hash of stuff written well and badly for the last twenty years! I've only been reading STF three years, but the old, back numbers I've been able to obtain, had some of this sort of thing. Also, there were so many present day exclamations, like "*on the beam*," (end of second column, page 8), and "*So what?*" not to speak of at least *fifteen* (count them!) "*Okay's*" and a plethora of *Oh yea's* and "*Swell*," that made me wince whenever I came to them—and all the characters talk the same! It was a stupendous flop! The illustration for it however, was very good. I hope this letter is not too long. With best wishes, I remain,

Very truly yours,

JUNE HARRIS.

INVENTIONS YET!!!

Frederick Street
Oceanside, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Here's my coat. Well, didn't you agree to hold that coat of anybody who would challenge the Zwiłnik to battle? (You war-monger, you. . .) Well, here's my coat. When I first set eyes (Mine, of course) on your pitiful plea for help. I needed no more to push my amazing brain into answering it. All for the sake of Justice, says I. You'll get my bill in the morning.

Returning to that obnoxious cur, the Zwiłnik: This creature is apparently composed of three sub-creatures; namely Vaughan, Ralf, and Heiner. Therefore I shall make out declarations of war against all three:

Declaration of War against

Vaughan . . . signed, J. N. P. Harrington

Ralf . . . signed, J. N. P. Harrington

Heiner . . . signed, J. N. P. Harrington

Yes . . . to all that know him, Joseph Neil Patrick Harrington is . . . The Fizikal Rek! I am willing to duel the Zwiłnik on his own terms; namely, with Z-rag guns, though I far prefer my own weapons, the amazing Triphorous Pistols.

When you press the trigger of this wonderful invention, three things happen. First, the victim is pounded to death by a barrage of the sister-who-is-just-learning-how-to-cook biscuits. Second, a shield shoots up from the magazine of the weapon to prevent the user from seeing the bloody mess and fainting. Third, a portable stretcher drops out and carries the corpse to the nearest morgue. I am perfecting a more effective version of this gun, which is known as the Quadrophorous Pistol. This operates in the same manner except that it embalms the corpse en route to the Morgue.

Now I've done it! I've gotten myself started, and cannot stop until I describe to you a number of my other inventions. First of all, I do all of my traveling by one of my better inventions

known as the Amphidestrian. This is a small device which fits into the back pocket like a cigaret pack, for I have condensed it to a very small size.

Upon tiring of using up his Number 18 Coupons, because of athlete's foot or other reasons (could be he's just plain lazy) the person who is fortunate enough to own an Amphidestrian simply stops walking and loosens his belt buckle. Because of its weight in the back pocket, the invention is suddenly let down a short distance, which action throws a miniature switch inside which starts it working.

First, a special spray device releases a quantity of H₂SO₄, or to those who aren't chemically minded . . . sulfuric acid. This burns away the back of the pocket, leaving the Amphidestrian free to function. First, a small but potent pin is thrust meaningfully into the part of the person's anatomy which happens to be nearest. This causes the fellow to give vent to a war-whoop which would make a Cherokee brave cower in shame. (This serves as a warning for other pedestrians to get out of the way) at the same time leaping high in the air. When he comes back down to old terra firma, the Amphidestrian is in action!

From the acid-entred hole, two tubular metal legs project themselves; and it is on these that the person lands. The legs start going places. If it isn't in the right direction . . . well *no* invention is *perfect*!

Inside the tubular legs are king-size hornets. When the Amphidestrian nears a body of water, these ambitious little devastators see what is coming and, not wanting to bathe their delicate wings, storm up the tubes. These legs, by the way, lead directly to an opening in the invention, on the same side as the pin. Thus the person using the Amphidestrian, already wounded where he least likes it, gets a double attack in the same place.

He gives like Superman. This new leap throws another tiny switch which sends top balloons down the tubular legs to the end, where they are inflated by compressed air. Thus, the guy-who-if-he - was - wise - would - have - stayed - on - his - Number-18's lands safely on the surface of the water, held up by the balloons.

By the time the peppered pedestrian reaches some foreign shore after balancing his punctured carcass aloft on the Amphidestrian, he gets down by again loosening his belt. This throws the little switch inside the device back to its normal position, and everything folds up . . . *whoosh!!*

Should he be dope enough to try it again, he just starts all over again by loosening his belt buckle. After three or four such trips the poor sap is going to get slapped into the hoosegow, as he can't keep loosening his belt without drastic results. There is a law or two against indecent clothing, and undershorts are considered indecent, I hear.

Then there is my masterpiece . . . that Invention of Inventions . . . the extraordinary Spitzelgoezenhiden. This is fantastically marvelous, there is nothing else like it. As yet I have not figured out what the contraption will do, but let me tell you that whatever it is . . . it is amazing.

That is enough, I think, as I want to keep you in suspense as to the rest of my super-inventions. Fancy that . . . I've forgotten all about PLANET STORIES and the Zwillnik.

Zwillnik, are you following me? Frightfully sorry, old chap, but I must have left you bumping around in the dark at the nineteenth paragraph. Oh, this is the nineteenth? Then stop bumping, here I is.

Zwillnik, you cad! (he said, throwing out his chest and catching it on the first bounce) Name the time, place, and weapons . . . I'll be there! No you don't . . . trying to have this duel on your terms, eh? You snake-in-the-bushes! I'll do the naming!

Time . . . next ish of PS

Place . . . PS, of course

Weapons . . . a pair of deadly Underwood typewriters.

And now, dear Editor, I bid youse Achoo . . . er, adieu. My cell-bloc is being disilluminated for the night, you see, and so . . .

Possibly yours,

J. N. P. HARRINGTON,
The Fizikal Rek.

POET'S CORNER!

84 Baker Ave.
Dover, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'll now borrow something from Oliver (Chad). The Viz needs some poetry, even though bad. Kuttner has always been one of my faves; His novel in PLANET entitled to raves. *Blackout* by Farrell wasn't so hot. To me it occurs that that plot is all rot. Pardon me, pliz, while I choke in disgust. That ancient idea's really covered with dust. But the novelet by James McCreigh Came right thru and saved the day.

The short story written by Editor P. Had a twist to its plot that electrified me. 'Twas better than most of the filler in PLANET; Some of 'your' shorts are so bad I can't stan' it. Al DePina rates an "A." His yarn was truly luscious, eh? But best of all this time was Bond. Of his great tales I'm always fond. Wool-dyed dis-gun fans may reprove, But as for me, 'twas in the groove.

Your mag this time has lots of Doolin; He ain't so gruelin' now, no foolin'. Who's that on pages 4 and 5? Rubimor? The pic looks alive! If it's Mr. R., he's getting better. I'll compliment him in this letter. That cover was an awful mess; A jumble of colors—formless, I guess. I'm shocked, I'm astounded, I'm horrified, yessir!

Can it be that the Viz had no letter by Lesser?

Where's Jay Chidsey in the Viz? He's a chap who makes things whiz. Conover's plan about tossing in fantasy, Might be somewhat fun for a fantasy fan to see (!!!! Zounds! Gimme air!) Alas, on the surface the thought might seem grand, But havoc would reign if it got out of hand. G. Waible, the Asinine One, Overused the corny pun. First to Mannion, who's serious. How much better than delirious! Second to the Looney Lad. That verse of yours was funny, Chad!

Give a pic to the *Darkness Dweller*. Elliot is quite some feller. Get the guys who trim the hedges, To come and trim PS's edges. Untrimmed edges often rip. As thru FS you gaily flip.

Come on, Wilbur! What's your racket?
 How 'bout a novel done by Brackett?
 In case this should happen to break into ink,
 Let everyone know: as a Poet I ———,
 That's all for now (ain't I a goon?)
 Don't celebrate—I'll be back soon!

Sincerely,

JOE KENNEDY.

POET CORNERED!

DEAR JOE:

There's many a time when an editor gets
 As looney as some of the Vizi pets.
 Then he gets a letter written in rhyme,
 And has himself a gorgeous time.
 He edits the thing for readers to see;
 Then makes bad meter, like this, to thee.
 So Peacock shocked and DePina's an A;
 And *Blackout* failed, was saved by MacCreigh!

Kuttner came through, in his usual style;
 But Bond was the leader by a doggoned mile.
 And the pics were knocked by your master
 hand;
 Well, the cover had form (arf!) you'll under-
 stand.
 But we haven't the time to comment any more;
 We've a new mag to edit—c'en better than
 before.

So write us again, when you can spare the time.
 Your poetry ———, but we like the rhyme.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

EXACTLY AS RECEIVED!

September 15, 1943
 Denver, Colorado

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm going to do something which you can't do
 for political reasons; I'm going to take a crack at
 those smart alecks who grace your Vizigraph.

Collectively, they're a bunch of childish school-
 age brats whose training and mental processes
 certainly do not warrant the assured air of knowl-
 edge which they try to flaunt.

First, not one of them knows what a plot is.
 I've read the childish rantings, read their glow-
 ing bits about the "plots" of certain stories; and
 know as well as you that the stories had only
 the barest outlines of plots.

Secondly, I've seen them tear to pieces finely-
 plotted stories with the inane expression that
 such plots have been done to death.

Their essential stupidity is reflected in their
 very words—for they confuse plot and situation
 hopelessly, not knowing the difference, not really
 caring, content to bathe their immature egos in
 their schoolboyish illy-conceived missives to which
 they attach their names. They gain a certain
 amount of notoriety by thus having their letters
 printed—but they are of the type of person who
 can't resist endorsing cheap cure-all nostrums
 just to have their pictures and names spread out
 on the printed sheet.

A situation is the thing which is happening to
 the protagonist. A plot is the extension of the
 situation in all of its ramifications, showing the
 intricate means by which a climax is reached. A
 situation may be old, but the plotting and writing
 must of necessity be fairly fresh, for memories
 are long and editors super-critical.

I've seen them eulogize the science of various
 stories, yet failed to find the slightest trace of
 science in them. And to the other, extreme, I've

seen them disregard the science in other stories,
 while praising the adventure that paced the para-
 graphs.

Let's take two examples.

First, Nelson S. Bond's *The Colossus of Chaos*.
 This was called a perfect science story.

It failed immeasurably, both in science and
 character value.

I shall give two instances.

First, the growth of the monster from purely
 electrical forces is basically unsound, for matter
 must be produced from matter, not from energy
 alone.

And the killing of the monster insulted the
 reader's intelligence. When lifted from the
 planet, he would not have shrivelled, still alive,
 to doll size, but rather, his flesh (?) would have
 sloughed or rotted away, not dissipating into pure
 energy as it apparently did.

Yet that was a "scientific" story.

On the other hand, let's take that effort of
 yours, *Prey of the Space Falcon*.

It has a plot, intricately devolved and inte-
 grated, and the motivations of the characters were
 clear-cut and natural. It was written in the ad-
 venture style, for it was basically adventure—yet
 it had its sociological side, too.

But the science was the nicest part of it. The
 metabolism part of your story was pure science,
 colored up for your readers, but straight from
 any standard text-book.

The food angle was the perfect answer to the
 changes which are taking place every day in our
 eating habits. The pseudo-science of the ray
 guns, space ships, et al, are strictly from science
 fiction's conceptions of what the future holds in
 store for us.

Yours is the science story; Bond's the adven-
 ture . . . Yet I will make you a personal bet that
 the turgid minded adolescents who fill your letter
 columns will vote those stories in just the oppo-
 site order.

As for the other scientific knowledge those
 readers have. Hell, they wouldn't recognize sci-
 ence if it were crammed down their throats. Too,
 in their opinionated assishness, each thinks that
 PLANET should be edited for his especial benefit.
 They comment upon the pictures, saying con-
 descendingly that such and such an artist shows
 signs of promise and to please give him another
 chance. Hell, those artists may not be the best
 in the world, but not one but couldn't outdraw or
 outpaint any of the self-appointed critics.

And as for the stories in general. Certainly,
 many of them are hack. So what? Hack stories
 are the mainstay of every magazine in existence.
 All stories (as you once said somewhere) cannot
 be classics; in fact, if the average was fair, you
 would be getting more than your share of good
 stories written. I have always heard that the
 doers do—and the can't-doers knock the efforts
 of their betters. Let the critics write and sell
 their stories before they take it upon themselves
 to tear to pieces the works of men and women
 whose efforts are finitely above their own.

The smug conceit of those writers (I will men-
 tion no names) who set themselves as paragons
 of criticism, and who believe that their words or
 "vanity columns" in various fan sheets should be
 the law, is somehow amazing. It gives those
 adolescents their true age, for their criticisms and
 ratings are childish to a degree.

I have no quarrel with any of them personally;
 but as a whole, I think their thoughts and letters
 should be better conceived before being sent in.
 Some of the writers are intelligent men and

women commenting upon the things which interest them. But the majority are egotistical self-praising little fools whose only interest lies in seeing their names printed in nationally-circulated magazines.

PLANET STORIES is neither the best nor the worst of the science fiction magazines on the stands today. Unluckily, you must deal with a certain class of reader with which most magazines do not have to contend. Irregardless of the stories or pictures you buy, you will be criticized. I know, for I edited a magazine for eleven years (one whose circulation was probably ten times that of PLANET's) and I know the problems which you naturally face. But as your competitor (John Campbell, Jr.) once said in a fan publication: It wouldn't matter a damn if all the fan clubs folded, or if they blacklisted any one magazine. For the sales records would not show the difference. Fans are essential only to themselves and their mutual back-patting egos.

Let them have their fun, let them write their letters. But don't take them too seriously. Their level of intelligence is not high, which is self-admitted. And in reality, they do little harm.

And as a closing word. Letter writers have your fun with me, vent your spleen, build up your egos—but admit to yourself that the foregoing is true. I shall not go into correspondence with any of you, nor shall I make a rebuttal to anything which you have to say.

If you see fit to print this, do so. Please do not cut. And my regards to the moronic little boys (if exception, state age) who live only to see their names in print because of overweening egos.

Sincerely,

E. F. BUCHANON.

UNRATED MEAT

Okay, Vizifanners, Buchanon is your meat. Agree or disagree, as you see fit. We have no editorial comments to make upon the meat of his letter other than to reiterate you're a nice bunch of fellows, albeit you do get out of hand now and then. Our personal apologies for parallels drawn—for we think Bond is tops.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

WE'D LIKE TO READ MORE!

927 Crescent Heights Blvd.
Los Angeles, California

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

Seems like every issue of PLANET is better and better. I don't know of any magazine I enjoy so much. You give us such a wide variety of stories that there is something for all tastes.

I liked the *Star Guardsman* best of all because I lost myself in it, the story was so real. I was glad that Europa could be free even at such a great sacrifice from the poor Panadars. The hero, Mark Lynn, was wonderful, and different from the usual hero.

Mr. Kuttner's story was good, but I could not get myself into the story of *Crypt City* like I could into *The Star Guardsman*. Your story was third only because it was shorter than the other two. Mr. Bond was next, taking fourth place, Gifford's cartoon was the best yet. Hope you can read this. (We can—and write again. Ed.)

MRS. TEREZ DUNA.

THREE YEARS OF MARTYRDOM!

2302 Avenue O
Brooklyn, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Phalanx upon phalanx of broad-shouldered young Terrans march endlessly down an awful path that leads to where no man can say. Who are these pitiful martyrs, marching—ever marching? And what is the purpose of their strange martyrdom? Upon close examination, we see that a good percentage of them are the creative work of a human named Drake. Others are the results of work by such Terrans as Rozen, Gross, Finlay, Paul, Leydenfrost, Anderson and Saunders. All of the grim marchers are quite definitely dead. Again—what has caused this grim martyrdom?

Well, Wilbur (friendly cuss, ain't I) it's this way. For three years now, the cover of PLANET has been nothing more or less than a stamping-grounds for the eternal triangle of hero, heroine and villain. All of the villains (usually B.E.M.s) have appeared rather ridiculous; all of the fems had expressions upon their faces as if they had seen their first ancestors come to life; and all, or at least a good part of, the men would have died, if the very next scene were to be pictured.

Now, sir, why this senseless slaughter of those broad-shouldered Terrans? They, sir, are marching inexorably onward until you change the cover theme on PS. And, to sum all this up, and put my cards down on the table: Give us a scientific, spaceship cover!!!

Now that that is off my mind, I have just one more complaint to utter, and then, as the letter to an ed inevitably states, "we can go on to brighter things." The complaint, however, is quite important. Of late, the caliber of the artwork in PLANET has dropped to its lowest since pretty near the very beginning. Let's have some changes, eh? Bok, I believe, is available. Finlay most assuredly is. Why don't you get these lads to do some work for you? 'Twas just a thought, just a thought!

It has been a long time, indeed, since I have been able to make the statement I am about to make. *Every story, ed, in the latest PLANET figured as at least good!!!* And that, I might add, is a bit of sensation-al-is-m! And how! At any rate, here is how a list of the six stories would look, in their order of merit—if, that is, all fans were as clever as I (am clever). Yes. . . .

Since the long dead days of Binder's immortal *Vassals'* saga there has not been a truly great classic to grace the pages of PLANET. At long last, however, we have one. Henry Kuttner has "dood it" with *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*. Whoever, incidentally, sneaked that title in under your guardian eye, O Ed, has done something mighty un—un—well, un-something-or-other. Ugh—never again! The conversation carried on in this classic was startling in itself. Most conversation in science-fiction drools down until it is at a low state resembling Mid-Victorian literature. (Not that I have anything against Shakespeare and the rest, but—you'll have to admit, times have changed.) Kuttner is the man to give us vastness and scope. Kuttner is the man to give us realism. Kuttner is the man to let us escape into the lives of his characters. Kuttner, I might add, is the man for you to get more stuff from. And more, more, and more. . . .

—Al DePina's sequel to Panadur was very good,

and really built up a Universe all its own for the reader to live in, and to be thrilled by. I'd like to see more like *Star Guardsman*, and more by this author.

Some fan sources have been hinting lately that Nelson S. Bond has been grinding out with "hack personified." This, for the most, is not true. *Castaways of Eros* was different from anything I've read in stiction in a long, long time. The pioneering was given in a different, and most enjoyable, fashion.

'Twould be unfair to rate the remaining three stories against each other because all were undeniably good and just about par with one another. Perhaps the edge should be given, Wilbur, to your own yarn, *Destination—Death*. I rather liked the ending. The plot of Farrell's (?) *Blackout* has been used before by Giles (nom de plume, I believe, of Binder) in a short some time back called *The Winking Lights of Mars*. MacCreigh's *Conspiracy on Callisto* was also good, though, the handling could have been better.

All in all, with the exception of the art (and the cover), this was, indeed, a banner issue. Before I forget, let's have more of the characters in *Star Guardsman*. They were thoroughly enjoyable. Particularly, need I add, Palanth.

And, as all sane people go cowering away to burrow fearfully into their caves, I say, in the voice of grim doom, "on to the Viz!" Alan Manion (oops, with two "n's" please) is away and in front of the mob with by far the best letter. I only hope, and somehow trust, that he was sincere in what he said. More power to you, Alan.

Oliver takes number two, even though I laughed rather uncontrollably when I saw that he would think highly of a Cummings' yarn per week. I like the way he attempted to settle the femme problem. Sadly, wisdom (mine, pal) tells me that that is one thing that never will be decided. Ah, well. . .

Paul Carter is always around with a mighty good letter. Give him number three, and let him become an egotist along with the rest of us.

Gifford's Ringer was cute. The pic, however, is still a lot cuter than the jokes (?) (Jokes?)

Thanx to the fans who voted me in to third and thus gave me an original illustration. More power to novels, and to any artist that can draw. And remember those poor martyrs of the cover situation. Don't let them down.

Almost forgot to mention that I think Conover's Off Trail Idea hits the spot. Swell.

Yup, next time, I'll be around, bothering you as usual. Hope you can take it. One of these days one of us will crack under the strain.

Yours till an ed publishes one of my stories. (eternity, eternity??? Argh!)

Scientifantasinically,

MILT LESSER,
The Happy Genius.

QUESTIONS, ALWAYS QUESTIONS

R. D. 3
Mansfield, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

The first glimpse of the Winter issue of P. S. afforded me considerable amusement concerning those readers who dislike the hero-heroine-monster theme, because here it is again. What new adjectives will they think up to describe their disgust? It was a very neat job, however, on

artist Gross's part, though I am still unable to figure out which story it was supposed to represent.

As for interiors, the tiny one on p. 3, of the ragged lad plugging the Tyrannosaur or whatever, was best, with Rubimor (apologies to Chad Oliver) taking second, although who are the semi-invisible baldies charging the hero with his gun pointed the wrong way who was supposed to be under the dais—oh well, the robot was nice anyway. The other interiors were inferior.

My rating system is very unusual, as it runs from one to ten. (No one seems to have thought of that yet.)

1. *Crypt—City of the Deathless One* by Henry Kuttner. Very suspenseful and exciting, and it's too bad Garth couldn't have had the robot get him out of the trap or something, but that would have spoiled the bum-makes-good angle and the story.

2. *Castaways of Eros* by Nelson S. Bond. Bond's excellent characterization and neat plot twist rate bouquets, but I have a weakness for novels.

3. *The Star Guardsman* by Albert de Pina. Rather slow getting started, but wound up in a blaze of glory. The manner in which de Pina shuttles human brains around, however, was no less than alarming.

4. *Destination—Death* by-you-know-who. Sorry we couldn't have gone a little higher this time, Ed., but thanx for giving us a setting on Uranus for a change, anyway. I'm getting sick of Mars and Venus.

5. *Conspiracy on Callisto*—by James MacCreigh. Plot and style stereotyped. Why are Ganymede and Callisto used so frequently in science fiction, anyway?

6. *Blackout*—by Joseph Farrell. About the forty-ninth story I have read by that title. These short-shorts never pack much punch as far as I am concerned. I like more room for thought.

Give Alan Mannion first in the letter dept. for his dissertation on the cure of our social ills via science fiction, Chad Oliver second for his poem, and Joe Connell third for his unusual style. *Style?*

Conover misses by a hair, but that's not much consolation, is it? His suggestion for an off-the-trail story each issue was excellent, however. Let's keep the ball rolling, Vizifanners!

Incidentally how will Chad Oliver rearrange his high octave rating system if a real masterpiece comes along?

And, oh yes! More editorial comment would not be too obnoxious! (Some readers no like! Ed.)

Sincerely,
DALE RIDGEWAY.

SPACE CRUISE!

Box 131
Hoquiam, Wash.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

My take-off blast dwindling to an inaudible murmur, I turned once again to the Message that had come singing into my communicator panel. It seemed as though Simak himself had intended that its import reach only my eyes, as though Mars had its secret for my purpose alone. By this I knew it must be top of the important list of things that take up my time on such an important cruise to *The Planet*.

But now I was besieged by that famous scourge of the IP, the dauntless Falcon. His exploits range up and down the spaceways, wherever his

Prey beat the downtrodden masses into obliteration. Seeing my wholehearted approval of his actions, I was allowed to continue on my way, to the next of my duties.

For now no Bond held me, although the Phantom reappeared from time to time, as though to run a close second to the Falcon. The vagrant thought occurred to me that it should be referred to as Space-time, occupying, as it did, a different continuum than that of time alone. But the essence of it was reminiscent of olden times.

The Assignment now facing me on Venus seemed a deep problem indeed, and I was continually on edge for the final outcome. To say the least, the final arrangement was a good and complete surprise. Jacobi, the assigner, had planned so well, and fully, that I was left with a deep feeling of contentment. I found myself wishing for more assignments from his capable, time-proven hands.

Before I could get my bearings, the Endless Night had surrounded me. I was enthralled to such an extent that a millenium seemed to slip by unnoticed. Although the action within was swift, I was still left with a feeling of lassitude and contentment that aided my past feelings for the pilot. Brackett could have even done better, but on the whole, it was gaining the edge in our race over past cruises.

Ere we could turn to useful tasks, Revenge reared its ugly head, to be lessened by the knowledge that a great injustice had been done. Vera must be avenged. What steps and time must be spent in preparation, for the one and only attempt must not fail. Perhaps a bit more explanation should be given in such preparations, but the sum of all did exact the toll to complete satisfaction.

With this came the unpleasant suddenness of the dread of the spaceways, Mutiny! We quickly marshalled our forces against this outrage, and outraged it was. With a few well placed Mentons, the mind-over-matter destroyers, the ill-planned Mutiny was overcome. Tanner had planned better escapades than that!

So with landing blasts roaring out their song of finality, we quickly scanned the last minute communications implanted across the Vizigraph, and without hesitation picked the most important ones. Heiner, Carter, and James Gray.

Ah! Yes, the sun Rozen spread all its glory over the whole Planet, and should never set to doomsday. The glory only dimmed upon our landing, as we hoped for longer assignments for the next and ensuing cruises.

Sincerely,

THOMAS R. DANIEL.

A NEW GREMLIN?

26 Horatio Street
New York 14, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have discovered a new kind of Gremlin! These pesky little mites carry blue pencils, and lie in wait somewhere between the Editor's desk and the linotype machines. They take a story, which the Editor has OK'd, and cut it—out of it! Take *Star Guardsman*, for instance. Now we know that de Pina can write! He gives us pulp-eaters real "slick-paper style"—clever description, excellent characterization, carefully sustained suspense, smooth transitions, and hence a well-balanced story. Then the Gremlins get at it. They strike out whole paragraphs which contribute to aforesaid smoothness. And what

happens? We read along, grinning a bit happily at the "slick" style,—and allofasudden we get a feeling like hitting an air-pocket while riding a 2-seater trainer plane. Mentally it is a loud "PLOP!" . . . emotionally it is a pure shock . . . actually it is a crying shame. De Pina must be furious; I know I am. Ye Goode Editor must also be furious . . . unless . . .!! No, of course not; OUR Editor wouldn't—couldn't—do such a thing. Or could you? Please, WSP, tell us it was the GREMLINS, and not you, who so obviously mutilated a grand story. And then set traps for those &%##\$*%# Gremlins!! (Gremlins, by gad! Ed.)

Star Guardsman was all anyone could ask for in a science-fiction tale. It was a winner right from the first paragraph. Its "pace" was so good that I didn't believe it could hold up right to the finish, but it did, except for where the Gremlins got at it. It had scope—"vastness"—action—significance—even "love-interest." It was so good I almost forgave you for printing the Kuttner . . . ah . . . "thing" . . . which had NO significance that I could find. Kuttner is a good writer; I've read some of his tales that made me want to stand up and cheer. But this *Crypt*—thing, made me want to give it a Bronx cheer. It made lots of noise in spots; in fact it practically rattled; and the love-interest was dragged in by the hair. When I'd finished reading it I had that "SO WHAT?" feeling. Shame on Kuttner for sloppy writing, and shame on you for letting him get away with it. I could forgive a "budding" writer, but Kuttner can write—so such messy stuff is unforgivable. You can't blame that on the Gremlins! It was maudlin, that's what it was. Maudlin mush, and thud and blunder . . . mostly blunder.

The "balance" of the Winter issue was fine: two Novels, two Novelets, and two Shorts. Both shorts had that economy of situation which makes any short breath-takingly good. Both had ironic denouements. The triumph of Right over Wrong in your *Destination—Death* was handled very well! *Congrats!* The irony of *Blackout* gave a tug at my heart—and made me hope for the day when War will be recognized for the social-cancer which it is, and the "blackout" of man's advancing enlightenment will no longer be necessary. So, give Venusian Orchids to Peacock and Farrell! (And a tankfull of Hydrogen Sulfide to Kuttner; the odor would match his story perfectly.)

I liked both Novelets. And that brings up the subject of love interest in Science-Fiction. It seems to me that Chad Oliver, in his *Viziletter*, has the right idea about that. I've read a lot of growls from fans who think that the Men-of-the-Future will park their emotions in a museum along with celluloid collars and 16-button high shoes. But I doubt it. We may change a lot in the next 1000—or 10,000—years, but I'll bet a Finlay original against a creased rejection slip that the love between men and women will not change; except possibly to become finer and more wholesome. So, it will still be a powerful motivation,—and as such has its place in any story with any scope at all. I'd naturally object to seeing love-interest injected into a story just to capture an additional 500 thrill-hungry readers, but when it is given its proper significance, as one of the motivating factors in man's striving for a better world, I say it "belongs" in the story. Why bother to explore the planets, or make Earth a finer place to live on—unless there's a Mom and Pop and the Kids to do that living? And you

can bet that Mom and Pop are going to be sweethearts before they get hitched—or the “finer world” is going to have a couple of important cogs missing.

The love interest in *Conspiracy on Callisto* did not “intrude”; but added to the suspense (which is quite a trick!) and to the “happy ending.” And in *Castaways of Eros* it was definitely a powerful force; sweeping away the petty, selfish rivalry of the two families, and uniting them against the impersonal greed of the United Ores Corporation. It was “natural”; not forced, or dragged in. It made the story more logical, rather than less so. So why not have love interest in a s-f yarn, if it belongs in the situation described?

In *The Star Guardsman*, the growing affection between Mark Lynn and the gal-scientist proves my point; women and men may aspire to greater, finer positions in the scheme of things—but they will still be men and women, responding to that urge to unite their lives and purposes which is the very force insuring the continuation of the Race;—and whether this is inspired by a loving “God”—or by a cold and impersonal “Plan”—the fact remains that it is so! And at no time did the love interest in *The Star Guardsman* intrude itself unnecessarily. The characters in this story were far, far advanced beyond man as he is now—but they were nevertheless human for all that, and so I say: Give an extra dozen Venusian Orchids to DE PINA for that; the very best—you know—the ones which grow on that floating island near Venus’ North Pole. And a tubful of scallions (Mars’ low-canal variety) to those Gremlins who mutilated the smoothness of the story. (SURE I believe in Gremlins;—I’ve got to—I can’t believe that “Our Editor” would exercise any part of such a slick tale, for “Our Ed.” is an author himself, and he should know better—so it MUST have been the Gremlins. (Them—or type lice! Ed.)

Are your illustrators afraid to sign their work? The sexy damsel in the illustration for Kuttner’s story rates a whistle—you know the kind; two-syllabled, with downward inflection on the second syllable. The rest of the illustrations were OK—nothing “sensational”—but better than past issues.

The Vistograph was “tops” this issue!!! This dep’t rates higher in interest-value than many of the stories you’ve published. Leigh Brackett’s letter was so good I yelped with delight when I read it. It is true that Miss Brackett does an occasional yarn which is below par (as who doesn’t!) but her work shows that she is conscious of an author’s responsibility to present a socially-constructive theme. I don’t mean “propaganda”—but a story based on the idea that democracy has a bright future—and a finer, cleaner future than any other form of gov’t we’ve yet seen. Brackett and de Pina always seem to write with this responsibility in mind—and I say more power to them! I’m glad she took a sock at those fascist-minded “critics”(?) who fail to see the rights of “minorities.” Them’s my sentiments exactly, Miss B., give ’em both barrels. For sheer content, her letter rates an easy “first.”

I’m also glad that Bill Conover has decided on the “straight-from-the-shoulder” style—the VIZI is the one dep’t in all pulpdom where a fan can “talk straight.” Nice going, Bill! Let’s have some more of the same.

Paul Carter writes a darn swell letter; plenty of thought, and a minimum of smart cracks. That’s the kind of letter I really like to read.

Guy Gifford writes as well as he draws; which is plenty OK.

In plain English, friend Wilbur, I think that the VIZI is the “warmest,” most natural and sincere “fan dep’t” in ANY mag., anywhere. And for that, dear Editor, ORCHIDS TO YOU. Your interest and encouragement has produced a sincere, interested, and interesting “fraternity” of friendly fans. THANX! To “sum” up”: de Pina was way out in front,—Kuttner was way, way behind;—and everything else in the issue rated “good.” Incidentally, I considered *Destination—Death* a considerable improvement over some of the earlier stories of that Peacock feller! Yep, he’s really getting better ‘n’ better!

With kindest regards to you, and warmest greetings to my fellow-Vizifans, I am,

Sincerely,

ALAN MANNION.

SENSIBLE COVER!

1109 S. 22nd Street
Milwaukee 4, Wisconsin

DEAR EDITOR:

Sorry to hear you must once more return to the quarterly issue, but that is better than no PLANET STORIES at all.

First, let me vote on the best letter. James R. Gray’s suits me fine, I’m an Asimov fan myself. (Aside to Mr. Gray: Isaac hath taken unto himself a wife and a defense job . . . he will probably return to writing after the war.)

As for the Stories:

First: *Message from Mars* . . . I yamma sucker for these Martian yarns.

Second: *Prey of the Space Falcon* and *Thralls of the Endless Night*. I’m not trying to curry favor with ye ed. The guy is really good. But Leigh is also good. What to do? What to do? The action in the first and the atmosphere in the second make it impossible to put one of these before the other.

Third: *Mutiny in the Void*. I was so glad to see Tanner back again I couldn’t resist putting this next.

Fourth: *Phantom Out of Time*. A dead hero grows on one. This one snuck up and made me list him fourth. Indeed he almost caught me sooner.

Fifth: *Assignment on Venus* . . . Some good ideas in this. I particularly liked the mold gun. A logical venusian weapon.

Sixth: *Revenge of the Vera*. If Hasse hadn’t killed off the original Vera this might have rated higher with me. But too much tragedy makes me mad at the guy who makes his characters suffer.

And now for the pictures: I must say a word for the cover. It is the first sensible cover I have seen on PLANET STORIES in so long that I almost fainted when I saw it. However, like all covers it is not adapted to the story. Note the workmanship of the man’s knife and belt buckle, also the temperature adjuster at the girl’s waist . . . quite out of tune with the savages of the story. They had no such science and arts. And where did he get that gun, egad? But I must compliment Rozen on a piece of excellent work. Personally, I think that picture nice enough and logical enough to go in anyone’s parlor, which you must admit, most covers wouldn’t. The best inside illish was Rubimor’s for *Phantom*. Gifford’s cartoon was delightful. Why not get him to illustrate some of your stories for you?

Sincerely,

NANEK.

WEINSTEIN'S GOAT!

568 Audubon Ave.
New York City

DEAR EDITOR:

The Viz fans have finally gotten my goat, especially HEINER, THE ZWILJERK. My gosh, the way he writes, you'd think someone had a gun in his back and MADE him buy P.S.! By gum, if I were you, Dear Ed., I'd print his letter in invisible ink! Why that moron, and all the other morons, including Milt, the lesser genius, or should I say screwball, should be berled in erl! Since they're so good in criticizing, let's see them have a story that they wrote published in a mag!

I'm not saying they should stop writing, but at least they can say something good about a story. As for me I think that P. S. is a swell mag., and that the stories (most of them) are darn swell, and, since they can't do better, just shut up and comment about a story, not give a cradle to grave analysis about it.

Ahem! . . . Now that I'm through giving some nuts the lowdown on things, I will comment on the stories myself. As I am a genius you can count on it as being absolutely and positively right. First, the topnotch stories are:

1. *Revenge of the Vera.*
2. *Prey of the Space Falcon.*
3. *Mutiny in the Void.*

The secondary ones are:

1. *Assignment on Venus.*
2. *Phantom Out of Time* (not such a hot ending!).
3. *Message from Mars.*

And, last but not least:

Thralls of the Endless Night. Except for the lousy ending, and a smelly plot, I enjoyed it.

Rozen is very good and I enjoy Gifford (his drawings and sometimes his humor). Leydenfrost very good. Doolin, OK. All others fair. Well, that's about all. S'long!

Sincerely,

AL WEINSTEIN,
Genius, etc.

TRIPLETS, NO LESS!

Wilmington Hall
Wilmington, California

DEAR EDITOR:

Once in a rare while circumstances conspire to produce a "Banner" issue, but unbelievable as it seems, you have had *three!!!*

Your May issue was memorable for three outstanding stories in the order named:

Alcatraz of the Starways—De Pina and Hasse. (The most adult story you've published.)

The Sandhound—Ross Rocklyne.

The Blue Behemoth—Leigh Brackett.

Then came the Fall Issue, and your story *Prey of the Space Falcon*, Wilbur S. Peacock, which I thought was the best you've written so far. And now, in the Winter Issue, you give us the wonderfully written, unforgettably vivid:

The Star Guardsman—Albert De Pina.

For fine writing, for marvelous dialogue, and fresh, exciting plots, Mr. De Pina is unrivalled. His name on your mag's enough for me to buy it.

But why, oh why, didn't you have Rozen do the cover? (Rozen has been ill. Ed.)

Very best wishes,

BILL ERPELDING.

OUR "TWO IN ONE" FREAK!

1207 E. Henry Street
Savannah, Georgia

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, here I am again ready to give you my opinion on the May and Fall issues. I have not read *Alcatraz of the Starways* yet, so I'll rate the other stories without comparison to this one.

No. 1. *The Sand Hound.*

No. 2. *Meteor Makers.*

No. 3. *Menace of the Mist.*

No. 4. *Blue Behemoth.*

No. 5. *Gripter's Asteroid.* Though there was not a plot to this, it was amusing.

No. 6. *Stranger from Space.*

Paul's pic. of the *Meteor Makers* takes first place for the art.

Harry Leydenfrost for the *Sand Hound* takes second place.

Now for the Fall issue:

First comes *Phantom Out of Time*. A fine story. Congratulations to Bond.

Following a close second comes *Prey of the Space Falcon*.

Message from Mars is next. I like this type of story about pioneer rocket travel. Let's have more.

Thralls of the Endless Night is written very nicely but let's have some space travel stories by Brackett some time.

I won't rate the rest, just comment on them.

Assignment on Venus—Jacobi had a nice story here, but he ruined it. He builds it up with a dishonorary discharge and then it turns out Simms is just given a rest. Phooey!

Revenge of the Vera—For a short story it was very good. Too bad it wasn't a novelet.

Mutiny in the Void—What was this? A space filler? (I understand the scarcity of writers, but you want our opinions.)

And now for the pics.

Rozen's cover was excellent. This guy seems to be monopolizing on the covers, but who's complainin'?

Bob Leydenfrost's pics look too stiff. Why don't you get an artist who can compare with your writing?

Doolin . . . is he still here? His pic on 81 is above his average. At least as far as this issue is concerned.

Rubimor could have done a little better job on D. Morris' leg. Otherwise it was pretty good. Especially Rima.

There *must* be a shortage of artists the way you repeated Doolin and Leydenfrost. Oh well! Do the best you can.

Another comment on the cover. Oh boy!!!

Now, a suggestion or two. I'll give you the same suggestion I gave another magazine. (As far as I'm concerned, P. S. and this rival magazine are the only two on the market, tho' I do read another now and then). Look up a writer by the name of Bolling Branham and get him to write for you.

Also, print a list of what is considered by popular vote your best stories since you came out, then upon request print up separate copies and sell them. If the paper situation won't allow you to do it now, think it over when it's remedied. (There's a selfish motive behind this. I want some old stories.)

On the cover again. Hot dog, what a gal!

Well, until next issue, pip pip, cheerio, ta-ta, bye-bye, so long, good-bye and auf wiedersehn.

Sincerely,

WALT KESSEL,
The Flying Freak.

A NOVICE GRIPES!

Box 1094
Dickinson, N. Dak.

DEAR EDITOR:

After reading the last five issues of the *Vizigraph*, I feel that it is impossible to control myself any longer. What is the reason for printing such ravings? Is it because you receive no other letters? Just one thing to be said in favor of them: they make me gripe, my favorite occupation.

I admit I do enjoy some of the demented babblings, but when half of the letters are knocking poor Cummings it makes a person froth at the mouth and in other ways degenerate to the level of most of your cracked contributors. This letter being one of said ways. Please note "Termite."

Now comes the horrible part. Ether, magnifying glass, clothespin and table of contents. Start dissecting.

No. 1 *Phantom Out of Time*. Wonderful story, but it seems to me I've heard that *Galactic Ghost* before, and anyway, he didn't come out of time, but from another world.

No. 2 *Prey of the Space Falcon*. When did Jean betray the whole group? Good story, but there were several unexplained events. Like Falcon's rescue while talking to Jean on the vizi-beam.

No. 3 *Thralls of the Endless Night*. The writing was far better than the plot. Wes Kirk did not betray the whole group to death, just the officers.

No. 4 *Mutiny in the Void*. Well written, but the comments in the table of contents are misleading: Not stirring, but thrilling.

No. 5 *Revenge of the Vera*. Good story, but it didn't quite click.

No. 6. Message from Mars. It probably deserves more credit, but I am prejudiced against *Invasion from Mars* stories.

Now about the wastes of paper, etc., that the herd of Martian Monsters called readers periodically send at you.

First about the Happy Genius. Happy he is, and he keeps me that way, too. He's right about those serials, especially since you are a quarterly again. I resent his exclusion of Cummings from the star ish he mentions. After all he isn't so bad, you guys aren't giving him a chance. If Heiner meant that confusing remark to be a compliment to Ray, all right, but otherwise you won't even have to hold my coat, such is the extent of my holy wrath!

Carter says but one thing that I am especially enthused about. That is his long-drawn-out comments about Rocklynne's plots. He, too, is persecuting poor Cummings. What did he ever do to those apes? In that and other ways he reminds me of a very dear friend I had before I left town quite hurriedly.

My dear Mr. Gray: Why must you abuse your typewriter with nothing more on your alleged mind than that? What is the wrong connected with the word "little"? And maybe there is a shortage of writers, but the harmless yelling we do does nothing but keep the editors and writers on their feet, instead of letting things slide. Anyway it soothes the nerves of thousands of people, even those of afore-mentioned editors and writers.

Chidsey had two glimmers of wisdom in an otherwise salted mine: that remark about the Ringers, and that last paragraph. By the way just how did that last paragraph find its way in?

Please Private C., criticize the rest of the mag. to your heart's content in good, pure, blood, but let the rest of us fight drivel with drivel.

Maybe Morrow is right, he and Private C., but that wild raving makes a person feel at home, or as if the little loonies were his personal friends, so please let us keep it up. True especially if all of your friends think you are a case for the state nut-house just because you read this type of stuff.

There is just one complaint, aside from the protection of Cummings, that means anything. That is: why the goofy comments about the stories by the editor? For instance: *Thralls of the Endless Night*. If Kirk was the "warrior" he didn't come. He had been there all his life. *Mutiny in the Void*. "Oxygen generators" lead one to think of complicated machines instead of planets. A few more are listed in my opinion of the stories.

The illustrations hit me as follows:

Excellent: Rozen's cover, Doolin's on page 73, because of its accuracy. Good plus: Bob Leidenfrost on page 3. The bartender is a little too calm. Good: Bob Leidenfrost on pages 54-55. Good picture. Also Rubimor on page 91. Good action, but it is a little different from the actual story. Fair: Doolin and Doolin. Pages 45 and 31. Don't know why these didn't seem as good as the rest, but they just didn't.

Well, that seems to be enough steam for any new engine to blow off on his first trip in the good rocket-ship *PLANET*, so out of action I go.

Sincerely,

GUY TRUCANO, JR.,
The Lone Loco.

AND SO WE SAY:

DEAR TRUCANO:

Was that steam—or hot air?

First, in regard to your comments. Be specific, if knocking the plot of a story. Unintentionally, by being vague, you accuse a writer of being a plagiarist. And the Phantom came out of another "space time."

Jean betrayed the group when she betrayed the Falcon, for he was the real intelligence of the Food Smugglers. And another reading should clear up the Falcon's rescue; it's there for you to see.

Wes Kirk did betray the entire group to death, for his betrayal precipitated a battle, plus the wasteful usage of the few heat stones still left.

Stirring—Thrilling . . . hmmm.

We'll let the readers work you over a bit on the rest of your letter. After all, you're new, you've got to earn your way.

Have a nice time—and ice is good for a bloody break.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

TO BE CONTINUED!

Live Oak, Florida.

DEAR EDITOR:

I swallowed my tobacco when the brazen-throated horns blared their raucous, audacious message:

"The Raym to 'A' Level at once! The Raym, to 'A' Level, at once!"

Dully I went plodding down the corridor, eyes half closed, hands clenching and unclenching, swaying and muttering to myself in an orgy of self-pity. I bumped off the blue walls, sobbing dismally. They had finally caught up with me! I might have known better than to try to put anything over on "Mr. A!"

"Raym reporting," I alliterated into the speaker disk. Two seconds later the elevator doors slid open. They would remain open for thirty seconds, and then, with or without me, would rush back to "A" Level. I always waited until the last instant before darting in. It gave me a thrill to slide through the rapidly closing doors, knowing that if I delayed a second the doors would slide to and chop off a leg. "28, 29," I counted, then rushed. I barely got inside, and then the pressure pinned me to the floor as the elevator shot upward.

It slid open, and a green-walled corridor stretched away. I bolted past Mr. A's quarters, hoping I could reach the soft drink stand beyond before he expected me to appear. A Xeno-cola would brace my nerves.

Guards materialized out of the wall. "Mr. DeShane is waiting," one of them said in a tough voice.

Despondently I walked in. DeShane was seated in his deep chair, the toggle switches banked around him. His lids drooped to veil the lambent flame in his eyes. His scarf, his robe, his blouse—like something out of a Japanese print. "Storgan, you may go," DeShane purred to one of the guards. "Rejmondo, do not try to touch the hem of my robe."

I frowned uncertainly. Surely I'd heard that one before, somewhere. . . .

DeShane's splayed fingers bit hard into his legs as he stared up at me. "Rejmondo, we sent you for a batch of PLANET STORIES in Fall, 1942, by Hawkins! One of them you slipped into your pants and smuggled in to your quarters. Why?"

"I liked PLANET STORIES then," I mumbled.

DeShane's right hand was curled in close to his—well, it was curled in close, and the wicked glitter of a Smelter gun shone there. Now DeShane pointed this weapon at me. "Why don't you like PLANET now?" rasped the soothing whine in his chill purr.

"They rejected a story I wrote," I blubbered. "I had it written out all nicely, with my name and address in the upper right-hand corner. I had corrected all but about three of the errors, and they sent it back!"

"And why do you suppose they sent it back?" DeShane asked.

"They just don't like stories by science-fiction fans," I said, blowing my nose on DeShane's scarf.

DeShane leaped to his feet, swinging the Smelter gun. The blur of gun steel was my only warning. The guard walked over and stepped on my neck. The expressionless mask had fallen away from DeShane's face, and hot color swept his acquiline countenance as he pulled a small hand microphone close: "Raym to the prison level! Two more guards!"

DeShane was setting fire to his ruined scarf as I was dragged out. There in the prison it was dark and unpleasant. I tried to hold hands with a pretty dark-haired girl there in the next cell, but she said: "I, too, am a DeShane! You must hold my father's hand if you hold mine!" I backed glumly into a corner. One of the guards kindly tossed me a copy of the Fall, '43 PLANET. My eyes bugged at the cover. Beautiful! The very best one I've seen on PLANET yet! I rather liked the stories in it, and the magazine as a whole was refreshing. You have a distinctive illustrator in the Leidenfrost boys, and . . .

"Up, bright-eyes!" roared the unpleasant voice of a guard. "Up to 'A' Level again. I don't think you'll be comin' back!"

I rose to my feet, and the guard unlocked the door. "I wouldn't be too sure of that," I warned him. "The readers may want more of this tripe."

The door clicked behind me with an air of finality. The guard shoved me along toward the elevator. "Alfalfa DeShane don't like guys who go messin' up his plans. I'd hate to be in your shoes, Rejmondo!"

The elevator doors opened, then, with the brazen note of a giant gong. The guard's grinning, ugly face vanished. Then the rapid ascent stopped; "A" Level awaited. The doors began to slide open.

Sincerely yours,
RAYMOND WASHINGTON, JR.

ONCE UPON A TIME—

Green Springs, Ohio

DEAR WILBUR:

Once there was a Vizifan . . . he loved the Vizigraph with a surpassing, all-encompassing love. A love, as a jerk with a cultural leaning would say, that was deevine. This fan wrote sweet little notes to a certain very nasty editor almost every issue of a certain pretty good magazine. And the nasty editor printed these masterpieces for other nasty people to read.

In fact one day, when the nasty editor was feeling his nastiest, he said we're going to let all you kiddies VOTE on various letters . . . and certain masterpieces sent in by a wonderful fan. So they did. And the fan wrote the best letter he ever wrote, the nasty editor printed it, and the other nasty fans voted.

Quotes—"I WUZ ROBBED" unquotes.

Awrite, you don't like my letters . . . so I'm going right on writing till PS is perfect, or I win a drawing. Of the two, may I observe, the drawing looks much the closer.

Back to the Viz later. Right now, the duty of the hour is to plaster the stories and pix with as much evil smelling muck as we can dredge up. All will be fairly (?) adjudged according to the now (in) famous Hunter-Chidsey 1-to-5 calibrated tenths system.

The first thing we see is the cover . . . by Gross. Someone has to do this . . . why not me?—Here goes . . . it was a gross mistake.

Horrible what? I thot so too. To be honest, the only thing corresponding to the story in it are 1. ruined buildings, 2. a man, 3. a girl, & a crystal B.E.M.

That outfit the dame is sporting may be sultry . . . but it just AIN'T a tropical. Also, what are the knives? Why not have the artists draw the pix and have the writers weave around 'em? Maybe the writers can see even if the artists can't read.

Cover gets 3.0.

C—COTDO—Kutner . . . No comment necessary. There will be enough drooling over this as it is. Pretty good. 4.5.

TSG—Al de Pina—Very much improvement over *Star of Pandur*. This young man, like Brackett, is going places. Wonder what collaboration would do. 4.4.

COE—Nelse Bond—Not bad . . . but O for another *Ultimate Salient*. 4.2.

COC—MacCreigh—3.5—threadworm plot. Baddest of bad men found to be FBI, IPP, or BEM agent. Only amnesia angle saved this.

D—D—WSP . . . Ye Ed.—Mediocre at best. 3.1.

B—Farrell—Anyone else remember *Winking Lights of Mars*? I thought of it immediately. So did Lesser. Great minds—same thought. Give it 2.5. Then take it.

The best illustration (except the cover, which was good drawing, no matter what I said) was the one for the Vizigraph. This is not only a sarcastic remark. It's the truth.

Since there will be little if any argument about it, let's quick hand the first prize to Mannion, and pass along to guys who are mere geniuses. Frankly we need a lot more Mannion and less of the destructive mien evidenced by some of the Vizi-writers. Possibly including myself among them.

In regard to Cummings . . . why don't his supporters all get together and start a cummings-fanzine, or a cummingsfanclub or something of the sort. That's what I'd do if I was ecstatic about the er . . . fellow.

This letter shall bear no pseudo . . . not even my familiar I.Q. Chidsey. No, I await naming (or maiming as the case may be).

By all means, have at least one off-trail story. After all, there are four or five stories left for those who don't like 'em, and after all, stf is an off-trail fiction in itself. When the day comes that the formula-plot has taken stf, then it will no longer be the stf I know and love. So—on to off-trail . . . to preserve science fiction.

The Gifford letter was not the Giff of yore, who had the epic battle with Asenion. Mayhap because this time he had no one to cross rapiers with. This must be remedied. Gifford is a Graziifnic. That, Guy, is an insult of the greatest magnitude.

Re. your query, or rather statement that Gluckstein was misspelled. If that's all that was misspelled then, I thank the editor who must have labored long over it.

I think your statement that mine was the best (O joy) *till* I added the Jap story (I've heard it but once) was slightly unfair. The same material was there *after* I added the story. Ah, well . . . Gifford, by the way cops second place.

We saw, this time, a very caustic Carter. Another poison pen . . . pal?

Connell, because no one else, I suppose, will care for it. I liked it, tho. He is third. I won't tell my old maid story 'cause my Jappo got torpedoed (faint outline of a joke there).

Yours,

J. FRANKLIN CHIDSEY,

LONGER LONGER!

Rt. 2 Box 529
Merced, California

DEAR EDITOR:

Wonderful! Magnif! . . . Rozen's best! Starting with the cover and working inward, here goes for a quick snort into the pulsating realm of pseudo-science . . . nuts! What am I turning into—a Looney Lad?

Well, anything for a diversion. Anyhow . . . the cover was tops . . . and any of these happy grouches who say different have my personal scorn to contend with. Rozen is improving over his earlier PLANET paintings. Yep, a future Leydenfrost.

And now, the interior. *Prey of the Space Falcon*—fair. Peacock's done better. So has Leydenfrost.

Bond hit the jackpot on *Phantom Out of Time*.

Well done, N. S. Good pic too. The guard with the frog-sticker must not appreciate beauty.

Message from Mars . . . a flowery tale. Doolin's OK.

Thralls of the Endless Night . . . dull at first but better toward the end. Ah—this pic made up for the one on page 2 & 3 . . . doncha think?

Mutiny in the Void . . . STUNK. As for the illustration—looks like an abandoned subway.

Assignment on Venus . . . a good short. Doolin is in a rut.

Revenge of the Vera . . . good, but couldn't the hero have filled the Vera with atomic explosive or such? Then, when the pirate ship rammed her . . . BOOM! Doolin again . . . but good.

And now, my pet subject (and everybody else's) the Viz. *Longer-Longer!* A plea for more space for us happy little geniuses (and morons) (Lesser, take note!)

As for the letter signatures . . . hah! *The Flying Freak* and *The Zwiinik* indeed! Just call me the Dgxxgmfpet!

Next, after batting the Viz about, comes the Feature Flash. So Conover was a soda jerk . . . hmm . . .

Now another plea. Puhleez, let's have more departments. Say . . . a debate page or articles or fan publication reviews. And how about more shorts. They break up the monotony of the longer novels.

Sorry that PLANET's going quarterly again. *"#11&! the war!

Fondly, I watch the warden slam the type-writer into its case and hurry out into the corridor of the Brooklyn Home for the Unbalanced in answer to the screaming of a Lesser patient in the next ward.

Yours for a Greater PLANET,

DICK COMSTOCK,
DGXGMFPET.

NO COMPARISON!

P. O. Box 18
So. Norwalk, Ct.

DEAR EDITOR:

The Winter issue of PLANET (just out) does not compare with previous issues as to the average quality of its contents, with one *Marvelous* exception, and that is the *Star Guardsman*. When I read it, I couldn't believe my eyes! Since you featured something else for the lead novel, I pounced with joy on Mr. Kuttner's *Crypt City of the Deathless One*, but I didn't have to go far before I began to wonder whether Mr. Kuttner was losing his grip or whether I was getting Almighty tired of the everlasting formula of Gore and more Gore and cannibal planets and plaques that threaten the earth, etc. Gosh! it's getting so that some authors don't even care how sloppily they write their stories—however we can always blame it on the war. Now, in my opinion, the second novel, *The Star Guardsman*, is worth the price of the magazine alone. It's the best example of an exciting, livable, suspenseful tale, believable throughout, that I have ever read in PLANET. And the wonder of wonders he accomplishes more dramatic situations than all the other writers put together with a minimum of action. If you don't hang on to this author, I hope they draft you!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Q. F. PUNICK.

WE DOOD IT!

225 Second St.
California, Pennsylvania.

DEAR EDITOR:

How was it accomplished? You "dood" it. A ringer, and I don't mean that sort of tripe that you buy from Gifford: or do you get it for free? Perhaps he pays you to use it, eh?

The Fall ish was superb. Really a classic. Keep up the good work and I'll keep writing letters like this. If I have something to praise I surely can be emphatic in dishing it out, but if you once fall down, I'll digress to the point of being nasty. Is it a bargain? We'll see.

Wherever D. B. Thompson happens to be I hope he has opportunity to read this. He will enjoy the conglomeration of bananas, pears and so forth.

THE COVER; Rozen is becoming better, and that really is saying something. The background surprised me to the point that I just had to sit quiet for awhile after seeing it on the stand. The proprietor of the book shop helped me to my feet and after taking two dimes from my pocket at my request, (the shock seemed to have rendered my arms useless) guided me to the door and saw that I cross the street safely. The gal is delish; the guy, a real guy. The amount of detail, something to tell the grandchildren of. All in all, I must say that this fellow does wonderful work. Again roses to Rozen.

THE INTERIOR ART:

Bob Leidenfrost: Mmmmm, I don't really know just what comment to make in this instance. His humans are all right but as to alien beings—not so hot. Shading—he seems not to know the meaning of the word. Rubimor should do the pics for your stories, Ed, they rate something better than that which was used for "Prey. . ."

Doolin still dood'lin, eh? I'm not prejudiced, but I can't like this fellow's work. One thing I will say is that he evidently reads the story before illustrating. That's more than can be said of some others. Now the pic on p. 45 is a little better. Perhaps he will be all right if he puts his best into things as he evidently did with this one.

GIFFORD: (3\$%-)\$\$?@*%#(@&\$).

Now Bob's piece on pp. 54-5 is not bad a-tall. I believe he could pen out a beauteous dame if he concentrated.

Page 72; Doolin again. Well ———. Page 81; Doolin again. Well ———.

And now to something that should rate more than I have time or space for. Rubimor, the master. This fellow is great. How about an ish with pics exclusively by Rubimor? Ah, I know it would be next to impossible, but wouldn't it be great, tho? If I'd happen to win an original (happy thought), I'd appreciate this one even if it is in the wrong issue.

And so to the yarns. Bond takes the lead for *Phantom Out of Time*. For once the best story was illustrated with the best drawing.

Simak rates second for *Message from Mars*, a swell novelet.

I've put you, Ed, in third place for *Prey of the Space Falcon*. You did a nice bit here. You know you forgot the P.S. on my last letter. I mentioned that you absolutely should use your true moniker on your stories. They're good enough that you needn't be ashamed of them.

Fourth place to Miss Brackett for *Thralls of the Endless Night*.

Assignment on Venus by Jacobi: Not too good, but rather pleasant reading.

Hasse fell off on *Revenge of the Vera*. His last two yarns haven't been so good. I have one of his, an original typing, that is one of the best he ever wrote. It was to be used in *Fanta*, a fan mag, which the war effort has held up. You all might yet get to glom it, I hope.

Tanner, for *Mutiny in the Void* gets bananas. Punk, and this one spoiled the whole ish. Watch it, Ed, you'll put out a perfect ish yet.

Now for a little drivel: Where is Bok? I might ask him the same question. Has Finlay died or joined the forces? Is Eron, whoever he is, still illustrating? More covers like that on the Fall book. Keep Rubimor (and send me one of his pics when I rate unless otherwise informed).

Vote No. One for Paul Carter. He knows a bad story when he reads one. Second to "Amateur" Fredersdorff for her very short letter. I hate anyone to write long letters like this one of mine. Third to DePina. He writes better letters than he does stories. And so for this time, so long—and you?

Sincerely,

V. R. HEINER,
The Zwiłnik.

FOX AIN'T KIDDING!

460 Orchard St.,
Rahway, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

I do not have a typewriter so I am printing this letter (?).

I was walking into a newsstand a few months ago and feasted me eyes on a copy of *JUNGLE STORIES*. All of a sudden an indignant green and orange cover smacked me in the face. I looked down and saw a strange sight (no, it wasn't you, Mister Lesser) an orange B.E.M. was hanging on to the P in *PLANET*. So just for a noble experiment I plunked down my twenty cents and carried out your mag. The B.E.M. leaped from his perch and went after the heroine again. (Now I know how you sell *PLANET*.)

Now for the fall (and I ain't kidding) lineup. Foist, the cover, I always like *PLANET* covers. This one was a pip (I'm glad Rozen quit the Shadow. He wasn't good at all.)

Now for the stories. First place goes to:

1. *Prey of the Space Falcon*—Swell scientific adventure novel. Should have been longer. Your best, Mr. Peacock. *Pic.*—Leidenfrost. Need I say more.

2. *Phantom Out of Time*—Would have easily been first if the ending had been better. I wanted Dirk to marry Rima, doggone it! *Pic.*—Rubimor's an awful lot like Alex Raymond, isn't he? (Hmmm.)

3. *Thralls of the Endless Night*—But where did the title come from? *Pic.*—Swell. Finlay and B. L. are my favorites.

4. *Revenge of the Vera* and *Assignment on Venus* tied for fourth place. Both were good. Doolin's pictures were excellent for both.

5. *Message from Mars*—Was fair. Would have taken third place if Kubilius had written it. *Pic.*—Doolin didn't do so good for this one.

6. *Mutiny in the Void*—Terrible. Same thing for the illustration, and Tanner my favorite author too. (Tut tut.)

May I make a suggestion? Get Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore to do a story for you.

Sincerely,

GEO. FOX,
The Jersey Bounce.

DER ZWILNIK'S FACE!

1299 California Street
San Francisco, Calif.

SORROWFUL EDITOR:

Heiner's obviously poor attempts at constructive intelligent criticism are no small failure—as I fully intend to prove. Every remark backfires very badly and embarrassingly in Zwiłnik's (how literal!) face. His mediocre and clumsily expressed opinions are striking—but only because of an excess of exclamation points. See, I have them on my typewriter, too!!!!

"A little more science would not hurt PLANET in the least." I definitely disagree with him there; I'll show you. On the cover of each PLANET we sight a small blurb that reads: "Strange adventures on other worlds—the universe of future centuries." Can see no mention of heavy science here. Said blurb infers that the book contains tales about spaceships, ray-guns, bems, and wenches, but what in hell is wrong with that? A spaceship and all the other aforementioned articles compose an author's conception of the future worlds; *must* he insert a detailed explanation on each article as he brings it into the plot? I say no, damn it! The author is writing the story from the standpoint that he was there—so quite naturally the so-called super science gadgets are commonplace to him, things that need no explaining. They are accepted facts.

The story is as good as it reads, and no amount of scientific drivel is going to make it science fiction. And it is drivel, no matter how cleverly done, because it *is* fiction. My only possible complaint concerning your stories is that they are at times not logical enough for stf, but I don't expect logic from PLANET—and so don't kick about it. All this, however, is incidental. I enjoy your mag, its freshness is enticing to my senses, and while I do not, in the slightest, expect the writing found in Campbell's twins I am always delighted by the familiar atmosphere.

To get on to another remark of Heiner's; fantasy, *when well handled*, can be used, but it does not fit in with the stereotyped science fiction being accepted today. Occasionally one is slipped under the line, and 'tis usually very rank.

I fear that if Heiner received the "straight fiction" with a scientific background he asks for, he would drop your mag like the proverbial hot potato—and I don't believe anyone could blame him. He is suggesting, in no uncertain terms, that you publish westerns with a futuristic setting—which does not coincide with his previous remarks. "Straight fiction" suggests and demands *orthodox* fiction, and I hope Heiner doesn't want that—I know I don't.

But I see no reason why The Zwiłnik could take up the bulk of this letter, he means nothing to me, I can take him or leave him, and I intend to do the latter immediately. The current issue of PLANET is so much more interesting than the dull witticisms of Mr. Heiner.

I nominate *Prey of the Space Falcon* as one of the ten best of the year. Excellent action with a dash of correctly sprinkled sex—and out of the feeder it comes. And in contrast to one of my previous statements, excellent, *logical*, plot. We have, of course, the battle between the Falcon

and the Administrators; then we have the secondary, but quite essential, search for the *smooth-alene* smugglers. Very nice, Mr. Peacock, congratulations are in order. The plot is ancient (yes, yes, we know, that phrase has become a stock one with almost all fans), but this pirate yarn is refreshing. Instead of being told from the brawny, husky, not too bright side, we find an intelligent narrator who has no intention of hatching his story up by dramatizing every moment. Hmmmmm, I hope you did not break any writer's laws, Wilbur. Using the 10 to 1 system, I'd give this 9½.

Was surprised at Bond's *Phantom out of Time*. Nelson, usually very careful and wary, treads on his own toes too damn often here to suit me. The plot suffers badly from lack of suspense and poor drama in spots. No new twists can I discover, just a rehash. 7. Illustration was nice and sexy, with a bit of time and study Rubimor might develop a rather distinctive style. Shows traces already of influence by Thorp—who was rapidly becoming a second Cartier.

Message from Mars was nothing more than a flash twist story, but just the same, I enjoyed reading it. 'Twon't linger in the memory any further than tomorrow's breakfast, but the idea of an invasion under our noses—and eyes—fascinated me. One of Simak's poorest, nevertheless worth 6½.

Tanner's bit was amusing, he chose an interesting character to save a ship—even if he did have to lose the crew. The idea of the tooth powder seems slightly far-fetched, but my knowledge of chemistry is nil, so I'll shut up. 6½. Doolin, when I first saw his work, looked quite promising. But now he looks quite the other way. Please, ed, no more. He evidently knows that a man has two arms, two legs, one head, and one body—but beyond that his knowledge and imagination runs dry; wet your whistle, Doolin, and do a few drawings like the new contents page heading. (Doolin did that job. Ed.)

The cover is something to pant about. Rozen shows signs of becoming the new *Petty of the Pulps*. I can see why the fellow is hanging on so tightly with that far away look in his eye. He may be shooting at something, but his mind is on other things. And frankly, mine would be too. Exceptional expression, give the cover a 10.

About the letters:

Marlow receives 1st place because of the various intelligent statements scattered throughout his letter. Also for a few bits of humor, whether intended as so or not.

Gray—er—Gray gets second, heaven knows why, unless it was for the brief-brief-short found on page 122 about the poet and the Grafus. I, too, would like to know-how-in-hell that got in. Maybe Jim will let us in on his private joke some day—let's hope not. The unveiling might prove disastrous to his reputation.

Oh hell; Lesser has to get his just dues, so let him have third. He likes to capitalize all words that he can—poor stunt.

And that, ed, closes the first letter to the *Vis*, my first, at any rate. I fully intend (uh-oh, repetition of phrase) to be with you again.

Good reading,

BILL WATSON.